

NEHEMIAH: THE WORK BEFORE US

Everybody Has a Section

Nehemiah 3:1–32

Main Idea: God does not ask us to do everything. He calls us to be faithful with the work He has placed in front of us.

THE CHAPTER WE WANT TO SKIP

In chapter 2, Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem. He inspected the walls. He gathered the people. He told them about the gracious hand of God that had been upon him. And then he said, “Come, let’s rebuild Jerusalem’s wall.”

And the people responded, “Let’s start rebuilding.”

Scripture says that they strengthened their hands for the good work. Great! Let’s keep reading in chapter three and see what happens! You start into Nehemiah 3 and then...**you find a list of names.**

You know these parts of the Bible. If you've ever done one of those *Read Through the Bible in a Year* plans, these are the chapters where your reading pace suddenly becomes **remarkably efficient**.

You hit the genealogies. “*So-and-so begat so-and-so, who begat so-and-so, who begat so-and-so...*” and you think, “*Got it. Lots of children. Moving on.*”

Or you get into Numbers and read “*46,500 from this tribe. 59,300 from that tribe. 45,650 from another...*” And you think, “*Wonderful. Everybody's accounted for. What's tomorrow's reading?*”

And Nehemiah 3 can feel like one of those chapters. Eliashib built this gate. The sons of Hassenaah built that gate. Meremoth repaired this section. Meshullam repaired that section. Next to him was somebody else. And next to that guy was another somebody else. And then somebody with an impossible name to pronounce repaired something across the street from his house. And we're tempted to say, “**Okay. Everybody built the wall. I get it. On to chapter 4.**”

We don't want to skim ahead. We should not skip the names. Because **the names are the point.**

If all God wanted us to know was that Jerusalem's wall got rebuilt, chapter 3 could have been one sentence. **“And the people rebuilt the wall.”** That general sentence could have been enough to move the narrative forward.

However, Nehemiah lists the details of the particular. That is something worth noticing when you get into the detailed lists or the repetitive specifics. When the Bible speaks in general terms, we take notice. However, do not get into the habit of ignoring or rushing through when Scripture gives us particulars.

In Nehemiah 3, God gives us names. He designates particular people. In particular places. Doing particular work. Chapter 2 tells us, **“Let's rebuild.”** Chapter 3 shows us what rebuilding actually looks like.

And here's what we discover. **Nobody rebuilds Jerusalem. Everybody rebuilds a piece of Jerusalem.** And it is rebuilt specifically and incrementally. One name. One family. One gate. One section. One after another. And eventually all those individual acts of faithfulness become a wall.

That's important because sometimes we look at the work around us and become overwhelmed by the size of it. You look at your aging parents or your marriage or your children or your job or your school or your church or your community and you see the wide-ranging needs everywhere around you...you see all the brokenness in the world and you think, **“I can't fix all of this.”** And you're right. And God hasn't asked you to.

God does not ask us to do everything. **He calls us to be faithful with the work He has placed in front of us.**

There is a section of wall in front of you.

1. THERE IS A SECTION IN FRONT OF YOU

One of the things you notice as you work through this chapter is the repetition.

They repaired...next to him...beside them...after him...opposite his house... This enormous project gets broken down into smaller assignments. One wall in many sections. One work but many workers.

Nobody is asked to rebuild Jerusalem alone. And that's worth remembering. Because sometimes we exhaust ourselves trying to carry responsibilities God never actually assigned to us. We see a need and immediately assume, **"I have to fix that."**

But the existence of a need doesn't necessarily mean God has assigned the entirety of that need to you. The whole wall needs rebuilding. But no one person is responsible for the whole wall.

NOTICE WHERE SOME OF THEM WORK

Several times, Nehemiah tells us that people repaired sections close to their own homes. Jedaiah repaired the section **across from his house**.

Benjamin and Hasshub worked **opposite their house**. The priests repaired sections **opposite their houses**. Zadok repaired **opposite his house**. There is something wonderfully ordinary about that.

Faithfulness often begins close to home. Before worrying about every broken thing everywhere else, ask yourself, "What has God put immediately in front of me?" What's happening in your house? Who has God placed around your table? What relationships has He entrusted to you? What responsibilities has He already given you?

You don't have to disciple every child in Berkeley County. But you might have children sleeping under your roof. Your children and grandchildren are part of that assignment God has placed in front of you.

You cannot care personally for every hurting person. But there may be somebody God has placed right beside you. You cannot meet every ministry need in the church. But God has given you gifts and placed you within a local body. You cannot solve every problem at work. But you can honor Christ at your desk, in your classroom, on your crew, and in your office.

You cannot repair everything broken in the world. **But there is a section of wall in front of you.**

Maybe instead of constantly asking, “**What needs to be done?**” we need to ask a slightly different question. “**What has God actually entrusted to me?**” Because those aren't always the same question.

AND YOUR SECTION MAY NOT MATCH YOUR RÉSUMÉ

Then look at the people doing the work. Priests are building. Officials are building. Merchants are building. Goldsmiths are building. And then in verse 8 we meet Hananiah. Hananiah is identified as...**a perfume maker.**

He's a perfumer. Now, I'm not an expert in ancient Near Eastern vocational training. But I'm guessing there wasn't a tremendous amount of overlap between **making perfume and constructing defensive walls.**

I don't imagine Hananiah showed up at the wall and said, *Finally! Something directly related to my professional training!* And yet there he is. Building. Because apparently the question wasn't only, “**What are you already good at?**”

The question was, “**What work is in front of you?**” Now, gifts matter. Abilities matter. Training matters. Competencies matter. Scripture teaches us to steward what God has given us. But there is a danger in turning, “**That's not really my gift**” into a spiritualized way of saying, “**Therefore God could never ask me to do it.**”

He can. And He does. Sometimes God calls us to work that fits beautifully with the gifts He has already given us. And sometimes God places us in front of a section of wall and we think, “**I have no idea what I'm doing.**”

Anybody ever feel that way as a parent? You can read the books. You can watch other parents. You can make all sorts of plans. And then somebody hands you an actual human being. And essentially God says, “**Here's your section of wall.**”

Marriage will require competencies you didn't know you lacked. Caring for aging parents may put you into situations for which nobody trained you. Someone may sit across from you grieving and you don't know what to say.

God may give you an opportunity to serve that requires you to speak, lead, organize, teach, comfort, visit, or do something that doesn't come naturally. And you may look at the section in front of you and say, **“I'm not very good at this.”**

Maybe you're right. That doesn't necessarily mean you're standing in front of the wrong section. Sometimes God places work before us that exceeds our competence **so that we discover the sufficiency of His grace.**

Paul heard Christ say, **“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness.”**

Christian faithfulness is not confidence that **I already possess everything this assignment requires.** Christian faithfulness is confidence that **God's grace will be sufficient for what He calls me to do.**

Sometimes God equips you **before** the assignment. Sometimes God equips you **through** the assignment. And sometimes He allows you to remain keenly aware of your weakness so that you never confuse **His sufficiency with your competence.**

So perhaps you're standing in front of something right now thinking, **“Am I enough for this?”** Perhaps that's the wrong question. Ask instead, **“Is His grace sufficient for this?”** That's a much better question. And the answer is **“Yes.”**

There is a section of wall in front of you.

2. YOUR SECTION IS CONNECTED TO SOMEBODY ELSE'S

Now notice another repeated phrase, **“Next to him...” “Next to them...” “Beside them...”**

These aren't thirty independent construction projects. They're building **one wall.** Eventually my section meets yours. Your section meets somebody else's. And that's important because focusing on your section doesn't mean, **“Mind your own business. I don't need anybody else.”** That's not biblical.

Individual responsibility is not individualism. I have a responsibility before God. But God has placed me among other people. And my faithfulness affects them. That's exactly the picture Paul gives us of the church in Ephesians 4.

He describes the Body of Christ as joined and held together, growing and building itself up in love as, **“each individual part does its work.”** That's Nehemiah 3.

Different people with different gifts working in different locations on different assignments but building one wall. Or in the New Testament, **One Body.**

So, we need to hold two truths together. **I am not responsible for your section.** But **my section is connected to yours.** My faithfulness can strengthen the people around me. My neglect can make their work harder.

That's true in a marriage. That's true in a family. That's true in a church. That's true in Christian community. You are not responsible **for** everybody else's obedience. But don't ever imagine that your obedience doesn't matter to anybody else. It does. We need one another. Your section matters because **it's connected to the wall.**

3. YOU DON'T NEED SOMEBODY ELSE'S SECTION

And this brings us to another temptation. Once everybody has a section, what do we naturally start doing? **Looking sideways.**

Why did they get that section? Why is their section bigger? Why is theirs more visible? Why are they getting noticed? Why does their ministry seem to be succeeding? Why does their family look like that? Why did God give them that opportunity? Why am I over here doing this while they're over there doing that? And while I'm staring at their section...**nothing is happening on mine.**

Comparison is a terrible distraction from faithfulness. You can spend so much time wishing for somebody else's section that you neglect the one God gave you. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12, **“But as it is, God has arranged each one of the parts in the body just as he wanted.”**

God knows what He's doing. Your calling isn't an accident. Your gifts aren't an accident. Your relationships aren't an accident. Your place within the Body isn't an accident. God providentially places His people. And that means we need something we don't often talk about. We must learn contentment in what we're called to do.

CONTENTMENT IN CALLING

We talk about being content with what we possess. Maybe we also need to learn to be content with what God has **assigned**.

I don't need your platform. I don't need your recognition. I don't need your influence. I don't need your ministry. I don't need your opportunities. I don't need your section of the wall. **I need to be faithful with mine.**

Remember Peter at the end of John's Gospel? Jesus has just told Peter something difficult about Peter's future. Peter turns around, sees John, and immediately asks, **“Lord, what about him?”**

Isn't that us? *Okay, Jesus, I hear what You're saying about me. But what about him?* And Jesus essentially tells Peter, **“That's not your assignment.** “If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you?”

And then, **“As for you, follow me.”** That's Nehemiah 3 theology.

What about his section? Jesus says, **“You follow Me.** Build what's in front of you.”

AND SOME OF US DON'T WANT THEIR SECTION—WE JUST WANT TO SUPERVISE IT

That's another temptation. Some of us aren't jealous of everybody else's section. We just have **very strong opinions about how they ought to be building it.** We critique. We analyze. We second-guess. We keep score. We become experts on everybody else's wall. “Don't they realize how long I've been a part of building the wall? Why didn't they come and get my opinion on how to build their section?” Meanwhile, our section needs attention.

Now, of course, there is legitimate oversight. Nehemiah himself is coordinating this project. Scripture gives leaders responsibility. Scripture gives Christians accountability to one another.

This isn't an excuse to say, “**Nobody can ever speak into my life.**” That's not biblical. But there is a difference between biblical accountability and assuming responsibility God has not given us. And some of us would have considerably more energy for the work God gave us **if we stopped trying to supervise the work God gave somebody else.**

Parents of adult children may need that wisdom. Spouses may need that wisdom. There is freedom in recognizing that **I am accountable to God for faithfulness. I am not sovereign over everybody else's assignment.**

There is a section of wall in front of you. Keep your focus there.

4. DON'T LET SOMEBODY ELSE'S REFUSAL BECOME YOUR EXCUSE

And then there is one little statement in verse 5 that almost jumps off the page. The men of Tekoa are working. But Nehemiah says, “**Their nobles did not lift a finger to help their supervisors.**”

Imagine that being your biblical legacy. Three thousand years later, people are still reading, “**Everybody else worked. These guys wouldn't help.**” Apparently they thought the work was beneath them. But what I find even more interesting is what the Tekoites do.

They don't say, “**Well, if our leaders aren't going to work, neither are we.**” They build anyway. And then get down to verse 27. The Tekoites show up again. And they repair **another section.**

Their nobles won't build one. **They build two.** That's faithfulness. Because somebody else's unfaithfulness does not excuse mine. We are very good at conditional obedience. *I'll change when she changes. I'll apologize when he apologizes. I'll serve when they serve. I'll get involved when somebody else does. I'll do my part once everybody else starts doing theirs.*

But eventually I have to answer a question. **What has God asked of me?**

I don't answer to God for whether the person beside me faithfully built their section. I answer for mine. Their failure may make my work harder. Their failure may disappoint me. Their failure may even be sinful. But their failure does not determine my faithfulness.

Don't let somebody else's refusal become your excuse for neglecting what God has put before you. The Tekoites just keep building.

THE NAMES ARE THE POINT

Now step back and look at this chapter again. What do you see? Priests. Craftsmen. Goldsmiths. Perfume makers. Merchants. Officials. Fathers. Daughters.

People from Jerusalem. People from surrounding communities. People whose names we have trouble pronouncing. People we know almost nothing else about. One after another.

Next to him. Beside them. After him. Opposite his house. A bunch of sections and gates. And eventually all those sections become **a wall.**

That's how God so often works. We tend to look for the spectacular. God very often accomplishes His purposes through **accumulated ordinary faithfulness.**

A prayer here. A conversation there. A meal delivered. A child disciplined. A Sunday School lesson prepared. A neighbor loved. A temptation resisted. A hospital room visited. A forgiveness offered. A Bible opened. A gospel conversation begun. A quiet act of service nobody notices.

None of those things by itself looks like rebuilding Jerusalem. That's because none of them **is** the whole wall. They're sections. And God joins them together.

GRACE FOR THE SECTION BEFORE US

And this is where we need to make sure we understand the gospel.

Because otherwise Nehemiah 3 can sadly, sometimes quickly become “go work to earn God’s grace.” But that's not the gospel.

Ephesians 2 tells us, **“For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift—not from works, so that no one can boast.”**

We don't work our section so God will save us. We don't build enough wall to earn His favor. We don't have to prove our worth by the size of our assignment.

We are saved **by grace. God’s riches at Christ’s expense.** And then Paul immediately says, **“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us to do.”** Do you hear that?

Grace—and then work. God has prepared work for His people. There is work before us. But grace changes the way we approach it.

I don't have to build a bigger section to prove that I'm important. I don't have to outperform the person beside me. I don't have to make myself indispensable. I don't have to be noticed. I don't have to pretend I'm competent at everything. My identity is secure in Christ, so I am free simply to be faithful.

And when the section God gives me exceeds my ability, I discover again that **His grace is sufficient.**

GOD DIDN'T SKIP THE NAMES

Remember all those names we wanted to skip at the beginning? **God didn't skip them.** Think about that.

We don't know much about most of these people. They're not Abraham. They're not Moses. They're not David. They're not Isaiah. They're not even Ezra or Nehemiah. They're priests, craftsmen, merchants, officials, fathers, daughters. They're perfume makers. Ordinary people who showed up and built the section of wall in front of them. And God knew their names.

God saw their faithfulness. Maybe nobody applauds your section.

Maybe nobody notices the work you're doing in your home. Maybe nobody sees those prayers you're praying for your children. Maybe nobody knows how difficult it is for you to remain faithful in your marriage. Maybe nobody notices the care you're providing an aging parent. Maybe nobody sees the quiet ministry you perform week after week. Maybe your section seems small compared with somebody else's. Maybe you're standing there looking at your section thinking, **"I'm not even very good at this."**

That's okay. God knows your name. God sees faithfulness. You don't need another section. You don't need a bigger section. You don't need a more visible section. You don't need somebody else's gifts. You don't need somebody else's recognition. And you don't need to spend your life supervising everybody else's work.

There is a section of wall in front of you. Perhaps you don't feel capable of building it. Then don't begin with, **"Am I enough for this?"**

Begin with **"Is His grace sufficient for this?"**

And trust Him. Because Jesus is Lord of the whole wall. **You aren't.**

And that is very good news.

You don't have to hold everything together. You don't have to fix everything. You don't have to know how every piece fits. You don't have to accomplish what God assigned to somebody else.

Christ calls you to follow Him. He has placed you somewhere. He has surrounded you with people. He has given you gifts. He has prepared good works for you to walk in.

And sometimes He will call you beyond the places where you feel strong so that you learn again how sufficient His grace really is. Trust His grace. And faithfully do **the work before you.**

Because those names we were tempted to skip? **God didn't.** He saw them. He knew them. He recorded all of those names of all of those faithful people. God recorded their faithfulness to the work and to their sections. **The names are the point.** And there is a section of wall in front of you. **Be faithful there.**