

Divine Discontent Recap: Where we are in the book of Nehemiah

Today we're continuing our series called *Divine Discontent*.

While discontent is usually thought of negatively, we are exploring times when God's discontent over a world subject to sin and death caused him to act, continuing His Story of Redemption. During these times, he also moves in us to create a dissatisfaction with the way things are, calling us to engage and be part of what he is doing. We're studying the Old Testament book of Nehemiah to see how we should respond when God stirs our hearts.

So Far, this series has covered

Chapter 1: How Nehemiah, the Jewish cup bearer to the King of Persia, had his heart Stirred by God to go back to his homeland of Jerusalem and rebuild the wall surrounding the Temple

Chapter 2: We looked at, How Nehemiah, upon returning to Jerusalem, assessed the situation, told his fellow Jews of his God-given discontent, and challenged them to "rise up and build"

Chapter 3: Is all about a Community on Motion. Where we see Nehemiah's plan not only begin to take shape, but the community of God's chosen people bind together and accomplish something bigger than themselves, the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Wall.

We are going to answer the question: What does it mean to be a Community in Motion?

Intro to Topic

It seems like the topic of walls is coming up a lot recently and its interesting that the timing of this sermon coincides with some of the events taking place within our country. I'm not here to make political commentary. My role this morning is to step into the scripture with you and walk through this passage in a thoughtful manner.

That all sounds well intentioned, and you may even be shaking your heads in agreement right now, but then we open up our Bibles and come to Nehemiah 3 and suddenly the task of discovering something interesting to preach about becomes a bit more difficult. Here is a small sample of some of our passage:

- › 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. And next to him 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. (Neh. 3:1-3, ESV)

And so, on and so on. Chapter 3 consists of 32 verses listing who built what section of the wall around Jerusalem.

To be honest, I wasn't sure where to start with this. I thought to myself, "I should probably check what other preachers have done with this passage." So, I opened up Chuck Swindoll's book on Nehemiah and Leadership, Hand Me Another Brick. "An absolutely fabulous resource for leaders who want to be challenged as they walk through the book of Nehemiah. But! Guess What? He basically skips this entire chapter! So, with no help from Chuck, I prayed about it and put it aside for a while

While at a friend's birthday party. I met someone who heard I was a pastor. He asked me the question "What's your least favorite part of the Bible?" He wasn't one of those difficult people into shock value questions but a follower of Jesus. I could sense something deeper was at stake and through our conversation, he told me some things that frustrated him about the Bible, referencing the books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus, sections in 1 and 2 Kings and other places that were boring and seemed to have no spiritual value.

I understand the Tension he was facing. Tension between understanding that the Bible is the inspired Word of God that is supposed to instruct our soul and passages (or entire sections and books) that seem mundane and, quite frankly, as he stated it, "boring."

So, the question is: What do we do when we come to these kinds of passages?

And, Even more specific to our passage today: What's the big deal about a group of people who built a wall 3,000 years ago and how does their story and the accompanying list of people affect us today?

Before I attempt to tackle this question, let me tell you the thing I love best about scripture. The fact that, even in passages seemingly as mundane as Nehemiah 3, God is at work, revealing Himself to His people, giving us special insight about His nature and character. Why? Because He loves us and desires relationship with us, a quality of relationship where we know Him personally and know what He desires from us as we worship him.

Because, as we will see happens with the people of Israel in Nehemiah's day, when we are stirred by God to accomplish his purposes, we are engaging in worship, and we are put into motion, a motion that isn't about us doing things for God, it's about getting involved in what God is doing.

And that's what we have in Nehemiah 3, A Community of people stirred by God, A Community in Motion

Today, I'm going to point out a few different ways in Nehemiah 3 where a Community in Motion shows up. But first, I feel obligated as one of the biggest Bible nerds room, to explore an important background aspect of this passage. To those that know me, this shouldn't come as a surprise, to those that don't hold on! I'm going to challenge some preconceived notions and help us approach the text in a helpful manner, with the bigger picture of God's Redemption Story always in the forefront of our minds.

About Walls (and Gates)

Let's begin our background exploration by looking at what appears, at first glance, to be one of the main topics in the Book of Nehemiah, a wall. I'm not going to bore you with how walls were constructed, stacked and cemented together in the ANE (the area and culture surrounding Israel in the time of the OT). Instead let's stretch our brain muscles a bit and talk about the philosophical purpose of a typical wall during that time.

- i. First, in City Walls, it was all about Physical Defense. AND cultures built walls as a sign of self-sufficiency. Patted themselves on their back. Strength and security in walls. Exclusive hubris and pride. Think Jericho.
- ii. Temple Walls = Spiritual Separation: Walls, within a city, that surrounded the god's temple and marked the boundary, between sacred space, the space immediately surrounding the temple and everything else.
 1. Within the wall, was Sacred Space, space set aside for worship of a certain god,

- a. This Space determined through magical ceremonies involving astrological readings, pronouncements of oracles, and sacrifices of animals. They did all of this to find a place that would please their god, in hopes they would be blessed and protected.
 - b. They attempted to build on places of natural power that would honor their gods and entice their presence to remain.
2. Cultures like the Egyptians had hundreds of temples dedicated to multiple gods, each with their own sacred space within its walls, where secret rituals, sacrifices, and initiation ceremonies took place.
 3. Several Cultures, like ancient Sumer, held mock-wedding ceremonies inside their most sacred space, where the king himself stepped into the role of a god and took credit for the creation of the world and the fertility of the people.

Now, when it comes to Israel it seems pretty evident from the text that the People in Jerusalem, surrounded by enemies on all sides, needed some kind of wall for physical defense in case of an attack. But, I'd like to show you that something bigger is also going on here.

So big, in fact, that it is implicit in the text itself

and assumed by the individual who would have been steeped in the Jewish culture of the time if they were to read this story

who understood that these events take place within a larger narrative which includes the books of Haggai and Zechariah,

written just 60 years previous to Nehemiah,

and the book of Ezra, written at the same time and recording events from the Ezra the Scribe's perspective.

So, In addition to defense, I believe that there is a second and more important aspect of the Jerusalem Wall, and its purpose is markedly different from the walls of their ANE neighbors. In fact, it's an aspect that we don't normally consider when we think about walls surrounding a city. It's the aspect of Invitation, where the most important thing about the wall itself are things we wouldn't normally consider, the Gates.

The importance of gates became apparent to me during my time in Aberdeen, while completing my PhD work in Biblical Studies. I was constantly in awe of the ancientness of the city and its surrounding areas. One of my favorite things was to explore the city. So, usually with my boys and Melodie in tow, we would go walking. One of the things we noticed pretty quickly was how high some of the granite walls were, so high in fact that it was practically impossible to see what was on the other side. We would follow these walls walking along the pavement (that is what they called sidewalks) while the mystery deepened. As we walked along, it was as if the wall itself was leading us, guiding the way and creating a palatable expectation. For what, we didn't know.

Then we would round a bend and suddenly come to an open gate. When you came to one of these gates, all you had to do was look through to discover something breath taking. The gate stood as an open invitation to come and experience the very thing we had been following the wall to discover. Sometimes we forget that walls aren't meant to keep people out. Instead they are meant to mark off

space that is held special, a space that invites an individual to experience something bigger than themselves.

You see, if we take into account that the book of Nehemiah sits within the narrative of God's Redemptive Story, a story that is implicit in the context of scripture as a whole, a story where God consistently acts to save His people and draw them to His presence, we begin to see that the wall the people of Jerusalem were working to build actually served to mark off the sacred space immediately surrounding the Jerusalem Temple in the inner part of Jerusalem, what was known as The City of David.

And, within God's Redemptive Story, the Temple itself held an invitation to relationship that extends to all the nations of the world. This was an invitation that began with God's promise to Abraham that all the nations of the world would be blessed through him, an invitation that continued with the people of Israel being led to the Promised Land by God himself, delving deeper and deeper into God's sacred space, all the way to the Temple Mount in the city of Jerusalem.

Within this Story, God consistently called His chosen people to be different from the surrounding nations, not because of a Hoity-Toity arrogance thinking they were better than anyone else. But because they were a chosen people saved by His grace, carrying His personal name, Yahweh.

They were to be a light for all nations to find their way into His loving presence. Isaiah 42:6 is one of many verses that talks about God's plan to include all nations as they worship in His presence. Speaking to the people of Israel, he says: "I am the Lord; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations"

In fact, just 60 years previous to Nehemiah's time, they had completed the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem, and the Prophet Zechariah spoke these words, again reminding the people of Israel, newly returned from exile, of a time to come when the invitation to all nations would be accepted and people from all over would come to worship God.

"Thus says the Lord of hosts: Peoples shall yet come, even the inhabitants of many cities. The inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, 'Let us go at once to entreat the favor of the Lord and to seek the Lord of hosts; I myself am going.' Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the Lord of hosts in Jerusalem and to entreat the favor of the Lord. Thus says the Lord of hosts: In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.'" (Zech. 8:20-23)

So, we cannot forget, this building project we are going to be reading about today was never about the wall itself, it was always about something bigger, Someone bigger.

Which brings us to the first aspect of a Community in Motion...

A Community in Motion is Stirred by God's Faithfulness

In chapter 1 we see God stir Nehemiah's heart resulting in his stepping up into leadership. While news of the broken-down wall is the trigger, his heart is broken for his people and what the wall represents, a fundamental brokenness in the community itself. In his prayer, he appeals to Yahweh's covenant faithfulness, a faithfulness grounded in His grace-filled love.

We hear a lot about Nehemiah in the first two chapters in this book, but not a lot about the community itself until chapter 3, where they suddenly begin to build. But, again, there is something that we cannot forget. This book, like other scripture, isn't about Nehemiah, it is about God and how he is at work

among His people, revealing his nature and character. God is telling us, through the inspired individuals who wrote these things down, what He wants us to know about Him, especially how he is at work in the background in subtle yet powerful ways.

So, when we come to chapter 3 of Nehemiah, we see something awesome taking place. A community springing into motion building a wall. While Nehemiah doesn't record this, because his book is a first-hand account of his experience, we can intuit a few important things.

That God was at work stirring the hearts of the people in Jerusalem at the same time he was stirring the heart of Nehemiah over 1,500 miles away.

Think for a moment what that must have been like. Separate tribes of people occupying a city surrounded by hostile nations. Just 60 years previously, they had made great strides by rebuilding the Jerusalem Temple, the cultural and spiritual center of their once great nation. At God's command, they had begun to worship Him again within the space He had designated. Things were headed in the right direction. But we come to Nehemiah's time and not much more progress has been made. The Temple in Jerusalem is surrounded by brokenness and rubble. God's sacred space, the area outside the Temple where people gathered to worship by reading scripture and singing is strewn with rubble, gates that were meant to be invitations to community and an experience of God's relational love were broken and blocked with debris. Walls that were meant to protect the people as they worship and lead to the gates of invitation had crumbled. The faithful people, barely surviving in this hostile environment, lacked the resources to do anything about it.

So, when Nehemiah comes on to the scene with the backing of the Persian King and the resources to repair the walls and the gates, to once again mark off God's sacred space in which His people worship, they spring in to action.

There are two beautiful but seemingly simple phrases that reveal so much. Bookends to our chapter today

- › **And I [Nehemiah] told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they [The people of Jerusalem] said, "Let us rise up and build." So they strengthened their hands for the good work. (Neh 2:18)**

And then, after some of the work was completed:

- › **So we rebuilt the wall until all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart. (Neh. 4:6)**

The people's hands, hearts and minds connected with Nehemiah's and they became a Community in Motion actively stirred by God, who continued to show his faithfulness to His people.

Which brings us to our next point:

A Community in Motion Responds in Worship

Chapter 3, like we said before, carefully lists groups of people who were involved in this God-stirred project. Imagine with me for a moment, each group building in their section, right where they live. As they work, they can look to the left and to the right, across from each other (kitty or catty corner, whichever we say in Texas) and see other groups working. Each group led by their own leaders where they live, focused on their own task, but part of something bigger.

Let's take a moment and look at the Verbs in chapter 3, verbs that describe a Community in Motion (arose, built, set, restored, laid, consecrated, dedicated, put, erected, repaired, rebuilt). These verbs, although simple in their use, are not just descriptions of mundane actions. When we look at the context and space in which these actions take place, God's Sacred Space surrounding His Temple, we can see that they describe something awesome. We see that God has stirred their hearts and minds a towards a singular purpose, and they act in one accord to accomplish His will, in His Sacred Space, a space He has set apart specifically set apart to engage in the worship!

In fact, their response to His stirring is worship!

At its core, worship is so much more than singing songs on Sunday morning or in your car alone with your windows up during rush hour, (although these are great expressions of a worshipful life). Worship is about honoring God for who He is: our Creator, Savior, Redeemer. It's about recognizing that His will and His purpose supersede any idea or direction we may have for our own lives. Worship can take on several forms but it is always about our awareness that God is something completely beyond ourselves and worthy of every prayerful and thoughtful expression we are capable of to honor Him.

Paul talks about this in his letter to the Romans, and interestingly enough, he uses Temple based language of sacrifice and renewal.

›I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Rom. 12:1-2)

Worshiping God is our ultimate purpose in life and should permeate everything we do. And, when we have this perspective, things happen, things that go beyond our own capacity or ingenuity. Because God himself is involved, empowering them for His purpose.

As the people of Jerusalem respond to God's stirring, they become a Community in Motion, a Community that Responds in Worship. And, as they engage their hands, hearts, and minds in this act of worship within God's Sacred Space, something supernatural happens that goes way beyond the construction of a wall. They start to become the people of Israel again. What once were different groups occupying different sections of the city, each with their own agendas, are now united through their worship.

Life Groups

When I start to think about how a Community in Motion Responds in Worship, I can't help but think of our Life Groups here at Fellowship. I am the Life Groups Pastor after all.

Here at Fellowship we've recognized that community is a vital part of living our God-given purpose. I'm constantly in awe of the way our Life Group members have bound together and offered up their gifts and talents as acts of worshipful service to our community.

› **Life Group Stories**

The Olade Table from Wed Night Families Midsized LG making Christmas treats for elderly residents in HUD housing.

Tuesday Night Ladies LG sorting hundreds of the coats and blankets for our Winter Coats and Blankets Drive.

Sunday Morning Midsized packing shoeboxes for Operation Christmas Child

Young Adults Women's who has been serving once a month at Exodus, watching the kids so the moms can take classes to help them re-integrate into society after being incarcerated

Several LGs pitched in to provide backpacks filled with school items and basic necessities for refugee kids new to Conrad HS

Just a few of the awesome ways our LGs strive to be Communities in Motion Responding in Worship to God's Stirring. When was the last time you were involved in a Community in Motion? something like this? Where is God calling you to respond to his stirring?

Recap

So far, we've looked at two aspects of a Community in Motion:

1. A Community in Motion is Stirred by God's Faithfulness:
2. A Community in Motion is Responsive in Worship:

Now, let's look at the 3rd and last point

A Community in Motion is an Extended Invitation

So, you might be asking, what does [Nehemiah 3](#), the philosophical purpose of Jerusalem's wall, and our observations about a Community in Motion have to do with us today? How does this story, given all its interesting background effect our lives right here, right now? Swing back with me to the beginning of our time together this morning. And remember where we explored how the Jerusalem Temple and the sacred space within which it existed, and even the wall being built by the people, were all part of an invitation to experience a relationship with God himself.

And How The people of Israel themselves were to extend that invitation as His chosen people saved by His grace, carrying His personal name, Yahweh. They were to be a light for all nations to find their way into his loving presence. All of these this was part of God's plan as He set the stage. For the most vital part of His Redemptive Story, that had yet to take place.

Something further was needed, to mend the relationship between God and humankind, a relationship broken by our sin and rebellion something so unique that there could be no mistake of God's desire for relationship with the people He had created. The invitation had to be more specific and personal. So, God sent His only Son, Jesus, to accomplish this task. During his time here on earth, Jesus made some bold claims, claims that - at first glance- seem like barriers, and smack of intolerant exclusivity. He said things like:

“I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life, no one comes to the Father except through me.” ([John 14:6](#)) and “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” ([John 8:12](#)) He claimed to be equal with God himself ([John 10:30](#)) and even that he could forgive sins. ([Mark 2:10](#)) Yet, if you follow these bold statements and put them in the context of his life: Where he: Healed the sick, performed miracles, demonstrated authority over supernatural beings, rebuked injustice, valued the dignity of an individual, and loved those around him well. He even died on the cross for our sins and defeated death to raise again three days later

Just like the walls of Jerusalem, each of these bold claims lead to a beautiful invitation to follow him to find purpose and meaning, in the truth of these claims in relationship with him.

As followers of Jesus, we are called to live a life of worship so contagiously that others around can't help but notice, and wonder what is going on, we are to be a Community in Motion, that Extends an invitation to free gift of God's grace, through Jesus Christ his Son to all we encounter.