



Studies in Nehemiah

Putting Our Necks to the Work of the Lord

Someone once said: *"If we had 300 necks, we would need to bow each one to the will of God."* Christ called for this when He said: *"Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me"* (Matt. 11:29). The natural man does not bow to God's demands; however, by grace, this changes in principle. He submits to the call of God and the yoke of Christ and begins in principle to live for God. In Nehemiah 3, we see many such servants of God doing the work of God. However, there were others as well. We read of them that they *"put not their necks to the work of their LORD"* (Neh. 3:5).

The Work of the Lord

The rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem was the work of God. More than a century before, the Lord had broken down the walls. In His judgment, He had sent Babylon to destroy Jerusalem's walls. Those walls that once had spoken of the strength of Zion and the presence of God among His people (Ps. 48:12-14) were in ruins. The stones were scattered and the gates had been burned with fire. Jeremiah lamented: *"The Lord hath cast off his altar, he hath abhorred his sanctuary, he hath given up into the hand of the enemy the walls of her palaces"* (Lam. 2:7). Nehemiah had also lamented (Neh. 1:4).

Now things were about to change. God had taken reasons out of Himself to deal with His people in mercy. God had said through Isaiah: *"Thy walls are continually before me"* (Isa. 49:16). In God's grace towards His Zion, its walls were already in place. However, these thoughts were now unfolding in time. Stone by stone, brick by brick, the walls took shape.

This was the work of God. Nehemiah 3:5b says, *"The work of their Lord."* This confirms what Nehemiah had already said:

"The God of heaven, he will prosper us; therefore we his servants will arise and build."

(Neh. 2:20)

On the ground, it looks like people are doing a lot of work, but it is not merely the work of man. The people we see on the ground are but "servants." Their Master is using them to build the walls of His city. We could say with Psalm 118: *"This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes"* (v. 20).

Salvation is the work of God. The church is also His work. He uses feeble men as His instruments; yet, the design, the purpose, the foundation, and materials, the strength, and everything else, are all His.

Shouldering the Work of the Lord

If someone could watch what all the members of your congregation would be doing all week long, and could summarize it, would it read like Nehemiah 3? "Minister X, with the elders and deacons, rise up and shoulder the work of the Lord in this area in this way. Family A over here does this part of the work of the Lord; family B, this part of the work of the Lord; family C, this part. The people from district A pool their resources together for this part of the work of the Lord. The ladies do that part of the work," etc.

Isn't this how it should be? Is not the church to be a body? Romans 12:4 teaches us: *"For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office."* Ephesians 4:12-13 clarifies this:

"For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ."

Paul further explains in 1 Corinthians 3:10: *"According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise master builder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon."* We can conclude that the work of the church should be very much like the picture painted for us in Nehemiah 3.

What lessons can we learn from these workers about how the church is to shoulder the work of the Lord in our day?

1. The officers of the people led the way (v. 1). They did not refuse to roll up their sleeves, so to speak, or feel they were above the work. In fact, they set the tone.
2. The people worked in a very orderly way. They did not fight about what sections of the wall to build. Each one took his place next to the other and contributed to the whole.
3. The people exerted considerable effort. The work of building and repairing the wall was hard work. It involved moving stone, lifting beams, setting up doors, installing locks. It is not recorded that any complained about the difficulty of the work.
4. The people usually worked as families. Whole families set themselves to the work of certain sections. Sometimes people from certain regions of Judah were responsible for a section (see v. 5a).
5. Women were involved in the work. What a beautiful scene is painted for us in verse 12! Shallum and his daughters worked on a section of the wall. Presumably, Shallum had no sons. God had given him daughters. However, they did not want to be left out of the work. They did their part. People would have noticed: "Over there is Shallum and his daughters, doing their part."

Refusing to Shoulder the Work of the Lord

We are reminded, however, that any company on earth is a mixed one. Even during times of revival, the church is not completely united or completely perfect. So, too, in this chapter. Verse 5b shows how there was a blot, even in this glorious work: "But the nobles put not their necks to the work of their Lord."

This line is a public and inspired indictment of the nobles of Tekoa. It has gone down the centuries to their shame and disgrace. They did not so much as lift a finger to the work of building the walls.

The way this indictment is phrased is noteworthy. The text, first of all, tells us of their *privilege*. The Lord was also *their* Lord, too. He had granted them many blessings. They were in the land of promise. They ate of the fruit of the land. In fact, they had probably amassed wealth. In order to be nobles, they were not poor. The temple had been built and the ordinances were so close to them. God had extended many kindnesses and blessings to them as part of the people of the Lord. Notwithstanding, there was not a heart to do the work of God.

Secondly, the text tells us of their *pride*. The fact that they were not involved in the work was not through ignorance, inability, or anything like that. They simply would not submit their necks to the work of the Lord. Their heads were lifted high, and in their pride they would not stoop to the level of being servants. Their riches and power probably magnified their pride. Perhaps they thought: "Let others do this lowly work. We will stay in our mansions. We cannot stoop to this level. This is below us." Christ later said: *"A rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven"* (Matt. 19:23). Paul

agreed: “*not many mighty, not many noble (!), are called*” (1 Cor. 1:26). Let this be a warning to us — we who live like kings compared to the rest of the world.

Thirdly, the text tells us of their *poverty*. They missed the blessing of the yoke of Christ. Instead, they continued yoked to their natural corruptions, their pride, their lusts. They missed the sweetness and blessing that God’s children know (Ps. 84:10). They missed the communion and fellowship of believers as they are engaged in the service of the Lord (Ps. 133:3). But above all, they missed the approval of God. And their pride is recorded throughout all generations for us here in Nehemiah 3:5b.

May this shameful record spur us on to learn of Christ. He is meek and humble of heart, and in His school our pride is subdued, in principle. Thus we learn to take His yoke and find rest for our souls. Truly, His yoke is easy, and His burden is light (Matt. 11:30).

Questions:

1. Why does God have chapters in the Bible filled with names and facts? Should we skip over them?
2. Nehemiah 2:20 puts all of chapter 3 in perspective. What does it show us that chapter 3 is all about?
3. Read Ephesians 2:19-22. Paul compares the church to a building in which each believer has his part. Think about this practically. What does this mean for how the work of the church is done?
4. William Tyndale wrote: “*Now thou that ministerest in the kitchen and art but a kitchen page ... knowest that God put thee in that office ... Now if thou compare deed to deed, there is a difference betwixt washing dishes and preaching the Word of God; but as touching to please God, none at all.*” Discuss this quote. How does it relate to Nehemiah 3? How does it relate to you?
5. Go over the five points under “Shouldering the Work of God.” We can learn from all of these. Which one is most striking to you? Discuss how these lessons apply to your congregation.
6. Isn’t it really pride that keeps us from shouldering the work of the Lord? How can we learn to have our pride subdued?

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