

Holy Ambition--Holy Progress
Nehemiah 3-4
Feb 10, 2019

Welcome! Public Service Announcement for everyone: This Thursday is valentine's day. Make sure you mark that on your calendars. Gentlemen, it's pretty easy; be sure to get your lady some of these (**flowers**). Ladies, you might be wondering, what do I get the man in my life. The answer is actually flowers....**Beef Jerky flowers**. You cannot go wrong! All the beauty of flowers, but edible and meat!

If you have your Bibles, will you turn with me to Nehemiah 3? We are in the third week of a series called Holy Ambition. This book was written about 2500 years ago, but has so much relevance for our lives today. In the first two weeks we've learned what it means to have a holy burden--where we see a need in the world (our family, our neighborhood, our church, our society) and we know God wants to use us to meet that need. Nehemiah's holy burden was to see the city of Jerusalem rebuilt and witness the cultural renewal that would follow. Whatever our holy burden is, we learned that, like Nehemiah, we need clarity, strategy and a community to see it realized. We left off last week in chapter 2:18 where the people listened to Nehemiah's plan to revitalize the city and they replied: "**Let us start rebuilding.**" **So they began the good work.** So construction has commenced. This city that had lain in ruins for 150 years began to rise from the ashes. And that sets the stage for where we are today.

Let's jump in to chapter 3. We'll read the first 3 verses. **Eliashib the high priest and his fellow priests went to work and rebuilt the Sheep Gate. They dedicated it and set its doors in place, building as far as the Tower of the Hundred, which they dedicated, and as far as the Tower of Hananel. The men of Jericho built the adjoining section, and Zakkur son of Imri built next to them. The Fish Gate was rebuilt by the sons of Hassenaah. They laid its beams and put its doors and bolts and bars in place.** Now we could keep reading, but we are going to see basically the same thing for the entire chapter. One group, one family, one leader after another taking responsibility to build or repair a section of the city wall. There are 40 different groups of people mentioned in this chapter. It's not just one person's responsibility. It's not just one family's responsibility. Everyone joined together and did their part. If we skip to chapter 4:6, we'll see that they started making serious progress. Nehemiah says: **So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart.** The people were committed and invested. They gave their time and energy. They gave their PTO. They gave their money, their expertise, and their emotional investment. They **worked with all their heart**. And they got more than half way through....

But just like with every time you are taking ground and experiencing breakthrough, opposition arises. **7 But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the people of Ashdod heard that the repairs to Jerusalem's walls had gone ahead and that the gaps were being closed, they were very angry. 8 They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it.** There's a constituency who was actively working against God's people. Sanballat, Tobiah, and a host of others all wanted to see this project fail. We learned in chapter 2 that they mocked and disparaged the work; now they are plotting to physically attack the Jews and do whatever it takes to see the plan fail. How did Nehemiah respond to the opposition? The way he always does! He hits his knees! **9 But we prayed to our**

God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat. I love how practical this is. He's a spiritual man, so yes, his first instinct is to pray and ask God to help. But that's not all he does. But he was also wise and realistic. He didn't expect a supernatural halo to come to surround them and make them impervious to the enemy's attacks. They took the necessary steps to defend themselves by posting a guard day and night.

As they are responding to the threat of physical violence, take a look at what happens next. First **4:10 Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, "The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall."** Frankly put, the people are getting tired and exhausted. They had the energy to start the project. There was excitement and energy and positive momentum, and as we read in verse 6, that carried them to finish half the wall. But there is still a lot of work to do, and the gas tank is on empty. They are depleted and discouraged and don't think they can finish.

The internal struggle isn't the only one they are fighting! **11 Also our enemies said, "Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work."** Did you see that word (**kill**)? Their enemies are not planning a silent protest. They're not planning to form a picket line. They want to destroy them. And they are not keeping their lethal plans under wraps. They purposefully decided to circulate the threats so as to intimidate and demoralize the people. Imagine what it would be like if every day you went to work and you knew there were people who were actively planning on killing you! The Neuroscience Education Institute has researched the physiological and psychological effects of living in a constant state of fear. The adrenaline fatigue ultimately results in immune system dysfunction, endocrine dysfunction, sleep disorders, eating disorders, headaches, migraines, muscle aches, fibromyalgia, asthma, mood swings, and emotional disorientation. That's what these people are facing.

So look at the next verse: **12 Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, "Wherever you turn, they will attack us."** The enemy's tactic worked. The people have taken their focus off their work and on to these threats. They're scared. They came not once, not twice, not three times, but "**ten times over**" and said "Wherever you turn, they will attack us." They are tired, troubled, and terrified. The wall is not done. But they are.

This is a defining moment in Nehemiah's leadership. And this is something that we all need to see and take note of. It's not enough to see a need, to have a holy burden, to make a bold request, secure funding, cast a compelling vision, recruit a lot of people, to get the work started...all of that is good and necessary...but what do you do when you are half way done, everyone is worn out, the enemy is fighting back, and even your closest allies and inner circle want to just call it a day because they aren't sure they have what it takes to make it across the finish line? What are you going to do then?

Take a look at what Nehemiah does: **13 Therefore I stationed some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families, with their swords, spears and bows.** So think about this wall that is surrounding the city. Some of the wall had been built up and was functional for defense; other places were still really low. If the enemy was going to attack, it was going to be in those low places where the wall was still compromised. So Nehemiah says he stationed people **behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places.** Where there wasn't a physical wall, the people became the wall. If you have ever heard the

phrase: “standing in the gap for someone” this is where that phrase comes from. You are exposed here. I’ll stand in the gap. I’ll fight for you. I’ll protect you precisely where you need it the most. **14 After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, “Don’t be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes.”** This is like his Mel Gibson Braveheart speech! Remember the Lord! Fight for your families! He’s rallying the troops. **15 When our enemies heard that we were aware of their plot and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to our own work. 16 From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armor. The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah 17 who were building the wall. Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other,** (They had a trowel in one hand that they were using to lay bricks, and a spear in the other to fend off attacks) **18 and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked.** Jump down to 4:21 **So we continued the work with half the men holding spears, from the first light of dawn till the stars came out.** So they worked hard all day long. As long as there was light with which to see, there was work that needed to be done.

Instead of giving up, they pressed on. They determined to complete rebuilding this city. With their energy, in their lifetimes, they accomplished something truly great. And I think this chapter provides a bit of a blueprint for us, if we want to see God accomplish something truly great through our lives and our efforts. Here’s what I see in these passages: **In order to accomplish something great, God’s people have to work together, overcome opposition, and finish strong.**

The last couple of weeks we’ve talked about what it means to **accomplish something great**. We want to live lives of consequence and we want to leave a legacy for our families. We want to truly enrich the lives of our friends and we want to invest into our communities. We want to transform our companies and we want to strengthen our church body, we want our lives to be used by God to see his kingdom come and his will be done, here on earth as it is in heaven. If we want to see that, just like the people in Nehemiah’s day, we have to **work together**.

I love chapter 3 so much. It seems like just a long list of names, but it’s a record of all the people who joined together for the work. The city wasn’t rebuilt by one brilliant pioneer doing everything by himself. All of God’s people united together to accomplish something far beyond any one person’s capacity. There are 40 different groups of people all committed who are recorded working on this project. Look at the ways so many of these verses in chapter 3 begin:

3:19 Next to him, Ezer repaired another section...

3:20 Next to him, Baruch zealously repaired another section...

3:21 Next to him, Meremoth repaired another section...

This list goes on and on and on...31 times that phrase **next to him** is used. One person, standing next to his brother or sister or neighbor and saying, “You are not in this alone. You don’t have to carry this load or fight this battle by yourself. And by God’s grace, neither do I. We are in this together.” If you are here today and you are in the midst of a battle. If you are overwhelmed and discouraged. You do not have to fight alone. We want to come and stand in the gap for you. And fight with you. I remember years ago training for my first long distance run. When I was running by myself the longest I could make it was 6 or 7 miles, then I just tapped out. As soon as I started

running with a partner, I could make it 10, 12, 14 miles no problem. Having someone next to you makes all the difference! The old African proverb is true: **If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.**

And I love how every single person in the community was involved! It wasn't just the construction workers, bricklayers and masons doing the work. 3:8, 12 **Uzziel, one of the goldsmiths, repaired the next section. And Hananiah, one of the perfume-makers made repairs next to that....Shallum son of Hallohesh, ruler of a half-district of Jerusalem, repaired the next section with the help of his daughters.** Look at this: we got a man who works with **precious metals**, a man who works with **perfume** (maybe not accustomed to getting his hands too dirty), we have a **high ranking city official** working on the wall, along with **his daughters**. It didn't matter what someone's skillset or personal passion happened to be. The need was to build a wall, and everyone pitched in.

This is a community-centered approach to serving instead of an individual-centered approach to giving. The individual-centered approach asks the question, "What do I love? What am I best at? What helps me experience a sense of self-actualization and personal fulfillment? Let me do that." The community-centered approach asks a very different question, "What does the community need me to do? What's the greatest need? I'll do that. You need me to lay bricks here - that's what I'll do. You need me to dig a trench there that's what I'll do. You need me to stand in that gap - that's what I'll do. *It's not about me, it's about we.*

As one of your pastors, I want to commend this church because I see that sort of mindset here! Take a look at what happens here every single week (**Pictures popping up really frequently!**) Church takes place the way it does because everyone is doing their part!

We are seeing that in terms of serving, and also in terms of giving. You know we've been talking about freedom for the last several weeks. We have had quite a few people share their commitments! Everyone is saying, "This is what I am going to do." "This is what my family is going to do." Just last week, because a lot of people increased their giving, our general offering was \$98,000 above our weekly need. So what did we do?! On Tuesday we called the bank and **this happened**. We got to pay down \$100,000 on our principal. In the last two months we've paid off nearly \$500,000 dollars on our loan!!! This is the day to drop off your cards. You can also do that online if you didn't bring yours in. We are continuing to work together. We've said from the very beginning our goal is 100% participation. Not equal gifts, but equal commitment and sacrifice. We are going to see freedom become a reality at this church!

What I love so much in this passage is how God's people filled in the gaps for others who were in need. If you were working on your part of the wall and there was a gaping hole next to you, what happened? God's people came and filled in the gap for you. The mentality: "You don't have a wall to protect you? Don't worry, I'll protect you." That is what the family of God is supposed to be about. No matter what you need, you are not alone. We are here for you. I have some dear friends in this church who are praying for spiritual breakthrough in the life of one of their kids. They are taking one day a week to fast and ask God to do a miraculous work. Do you know what other people in their life group are doing? Joining them in fasting on the same day every week! You're hurting right now? You're struggling right now? Don't worry. You are not in this alone. I will stand in the gap for you!

In order to accomplish something great, God's people have to work together, overcome opposition, and finish strong. Internally, Nehemiah and his companions had to overcome fatigue and exhaustion, and then externally they had to overcome the opposition of enemy attack and constant fear.

Anytime you try to accomplish anything that is actually going to last for eternity, anytime you try to capture ground that belongs to the enemy and reclaim it for Christ, you are going to face opposition. You are going to have a battle on your hands. If you don't want challenge or opposition, if you don't want hardship or difficulty, there's a pretty easy path to take: Say nothing, do nothing, and accomplish nothing that will last for eternity. If you want to fly under the radar, that's the path to take. But if you have a holy ambition for God to use you to make a difference, get ready for opposition, because the enemy does not want that to happen.

Hear me on this:

- You have an enemy who doesn't want you to walk in sexual purity.
- The enemy doesn't want you to be free from the bondage of alcohol.
- The enemy doesn't want you to have a strong, Christ-centered marriage where you are praying with your spouse every day.
- The enemy doesn't want broken relationships in your family to be restored.
- The enemy doesn't want generational chains to be broken.
- We have an enemy who doesn't want our church to be united and strong and mission focused.
- We have an enemy who doesn't want lost people to be saved.
- We have an enemy who doesn't want our culture to be renewed.
- We have an enemy who doesn't want hope in our city.

So when we fight to bring those things about, guess what? There is going to be a battle. The enemy will begin to denounce and defame you, so that he can discourage and demoralize you, so that he can eventually dismantle and destroy you. That is his game plan. What does **1 Peter 5:8** say, **"Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour."** That's what he tried to do with Nehemiah, and that's what he will try to do with you. Do you remember how Nehemiah responded to that threat? He told the people to keep working, but also to prepare for battle: **4:17 Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other.** When opposition arises, we cannot afford to give in. We cannot afford to give up. That's the precise moment that we have to pull together, rely on one another, and do what?

Finish strong. After the work got started and the wall was half finished, the people looked at all the rubble and how much longer they still had to go. Do you remember what the people said? **4:10 The people in Judah said, "The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall."** Translation: *Let's just call it a day. We tried our best, but it's harder than we thought it would be.* If you want to accomplish something great, it's not enough to start strong, you have to finish strong. Statisticians have analyzed marathon runners, and have discovered the least frequent and most frequent mile markers where runners drop out. Do you know the least likely mile for a marathon runner to drop out? The first mile. Everyone can make it out of the gates. Do you know the second least likely mile for a runner to drop out? The last mile, because once you've made it so far and the end is in sight, no one wants to stop then? The most common mile where people give up. Mile 20. Well over halfway in, you

are physically and emotionally exhausted and there is still a long way to go. That's the place these people are at. They've made it a long way, but they are discouraged and ready to throw in the towel. And that's just the first challenge!

When we are tempted to give in, give up, or stop before the job is done, we need to do what Nehemiah did. Nehemiah called them to do two things. **Remember God!** He says: 4:14 **Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome.** No matter what you might be fighting for, let me remind you today: The Bible says the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. The Bible says that we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. The Bible says that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth nor anything else in all of creation will be able to separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Remember what's at stake. He says 4:14 **Fight for your families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes.** Nehemiah is reminding them: "This isn't some test. This isn't a pointless assignment. This isn't for you to have a plaque hanging on the wall and a medallion around your neck. You are fighting for your families. For your children. For your homes." I don't know what battle you are in right now. I don't know what God might be calling you to accomplish. Some of you are fighting for your first week of sobriety. Some are fighting to save a marriage. Some are fighting to advance the mission of God in a certain area. Whatever it is, we truly can see something great accomplished through our lives if we work together, overcome opposition, and finish strong.

Communion together. Read from Hebrews 12:1-3.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.