

Teamwork

Nehemiah 3:1-32

(Expanded Sermon Notes)



Teamwork is a powerful thing. I think we have all experienced or seen the positive reality of that statement. We watch sports teams that succeed against great odds when they play as a team and not as individuals. Perhaps, we played on a team like that once. Or, at least, we have all experienced the antithesis of it. We have all been part of a bad group project that either fell apart for lack of leadership or, more often it was sabotaged by individual priorities. In Nehemiah's story, we are about to witness the power of teamwork as Nehemiah, and the people begin working on the wall. What we will come to see through their example and reinforced through our experience is that **nothing worthwhile happens alone**.

1. A bite too big to chew alone.

- a. Rewind: Let's review where we have been.
 - i. Chapter 1 - **The steady love of God allows us to reckon with the past, repent in the present, and move forward in faith.**
 - 1. We're introduced to Nehemiah and his situation.
 - a. He is Jewish and an official in the king's court.
 - b. He is living during the Persian rule of Palestine during the era known as the post-exilic era.
 - 2. He hears the report about Jerusalem, and it breaks his heart.
 - a. He responds to this news by entering into a four-month season of prayer and fasting. (Kislev → Nisan / December → April)
 - b. In his praying, he confronts the past, repents in the present, and looks forward to the future in hope. → All while being supported by God's loyal love.
 - ii. Chapter 2 - **We need to understand where we are before we can move forward.**
 - 1. After his fourth month season of prayer and fasting, he makes his appeal to the king during the new year's celebration.
 - a. This was a month-to-two-month-long party that was designed to demonstrate the wealth and power of the king.
 - b. The Persian kings were famous for their drinking parties (see Esther 1:3-8), which were an ancient custom in the Near East.¹

¹ Mason, Eric. Nehemiah For You: Strength to Build for God (God's Word For You) (p. 28). The Good Book Company. Kindle Edition.

2. Having the blessing of the king and the physical supplies, he makes the journey and assessment of the state of Jerusalem.
 - a. **"It is the *disgrace*, not the insecurity of their position, which strikes him."** ²
 - i. Nehemiah sees the state of the city as a direct relationship to the current state of Israel's relationship with God.
 - b. Having spent three days and one full night surveying the city, he now understands the scope of the work and the vision for the future.
- b. **This is too big for Nehemiah to take on his own.**
 - i. Again, what Nehemiah has discovered is the devastating reality of the scope of the rebuilding work.
 1. This is not a quick flip... Some drywall patch, a new linoleum floor, and some fresh paint. This is a down to the studs remodel.
 2. Archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon notes: **"The effect on Jerusalem was much more disastrous and far-reaching than merely to render the city defenseless ... The whole system of terraces down the (eastern) slope, dependent on retaining walls buttressed in turn by the fill of the next lower terrace, was ultimately dependent on the town wall at the base, forming the lowest and most substantial of the retaining walls."**³
 3. **The emphasis on "building," rather than just "repair," in these opening verses is quite marked, and might suggest more extensive destruction along this vulnerable section than elsewhere.** However, the fact that "repaired" is used also for the devastated eastern side later in the chapter shows that not too much weight should be put on the variation in vocabulary.⁴
 - ii. Chapter 3 gives us another angle on the scope of the work.
 1. Remember – Nehemiah appeals to those living there that they need to do this work. (2:17)
 - a. The word ***repaired*** will now dominate the chapter. As Coggins points out, the Hebrew verb is a **general term meaning 'to make firm or strong'**. It does not necessarily mean restoring everything as before. ⁵
 2. Lots of helping hands!
 - a. As we read the chapter, we need to pay attention to how many different groups and professions helped in this rebuilding work.
 - b. Some forty or more sections are mentioned in the list, most of them, we must suppose, working simultaneously. ⁶
 - c. Even with all of the hands, it is going to take 52 days for the wall work to be complete. (cf. 6:15)
- c. **This was really important work.**
 - i. The wall encircling the city was a sign of its internal stability—or lack of it. Jerusalem was socially, economically, and spiritually without structure and stability.⁷

² H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 191.

³ Kathleen Kenyon, (Digging up Jerusalem, p 170)

⁴ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 203–204.

⁵ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 94.

⁶ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 211.

⁷ Mason, Eric. *Nehemiah For You: Strength to Build for God (God's Word For You)* (p. 47). The Good Book Company. Kindle Edition.

1. Again, we need to remember that Nehemiah sees himself, Israel as a people, and the city itself all in covenant unity with God. → They are one, bound together.
- ii. We see the consecration of the gates once they are repaired.
 1. “Consecrate” means “set something aside for a unique task.” In Hebrew it is related to the word “holy.” They consecrated this gate as a unique gate.
 - a. I.e., **This thing is for God.**
 2. To consecrate the gate, the priests would have smeared either oil or blood on it.⁸
- iii. The obvious question that should stand out to us is, **“Do we see ourselves and our work and lives in the same light as Nehemiah?”**
 1. Last week we asked it this way → What need to be rebuilt in my life?
 2. **Five areas to put before the Lord for rebuilding:**
 - a. **Identity** – How I see myself.
 - i. Am I putting my stock in Jesus or in a secondary thing?
 - b. **Walk** – How I am living.
 - i. Am I increasing in the fruit of the Spirit? (Gal. 5)
 - c. **Talk** – How I speak to others and to God.
 - i. What does my prayer life look like?
 - ii. Do I believe that my words have the power to give life or take life? (James 3:5-12)
 - d. **Feed** – What am I putting in my heart and mind?
 - i. If I want to grow in the likeness of Jesus, I need to put Jesus in.
 - e. **Clean** – This is the area of repentance.
 - i. Are you / we routinely practicing repentance? That is stepping off of the path of self and onto the path of Jesus?
 3. **We might ask it this way, “Do I see my life as something that is in partnership with and as a holy offering to the Lord?”**
 - a. I.e., Am I about the Lord’s purposes in every activity that I engage in?

2. Many skills needed.

- a. We see all of these gates and sections of the wall that are now being repaired.
 - i. Side note – We do not know where all of the gates referenced were historically.
 1. Example: “The Fish Gate” (cf. 12:39; Zeph 1:10; 2 Chr 33:14) cannot be certainly located. While it may well have been the way through which fish came into the city’s fish market, we do not know whether that was from Galilee to the north or the Mediterranean coast to the west.⁹
 2. **The Fish Gate** may have been the gate through which the people of Tyre brought fish they sold (13:16).¹⁰
- b. Not only is this job a really big one, but we see all kinds of skills and professions joining in on the work. → There is an important note on unity here that we will get to.

⁸ Mason, Eric. *Nehemiah For You: Strength to Build for God (God's Word For You)* (pp. 50-51). The Good Book Company. Kindle Edition.

⁹ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 204.

¹⁰ Gene A. Getz, “Nehemiah,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 679.

- i. We see religious leaders, goldsmiths, perfumers, merchants, political leaders (v.9,14), and regular everyday people whose vocation or social position is not mentioned.
 - ii. **We are struck first by the *unity of intention* which is here displayed.** Some forty or more sections are mentioned in the list, most of them, we must suppose, working simultaneously. This, it should be remembered, includes extensive areas where a completely new line for the wall was being followed. Moreover, we learn in the next chapter that the work was done sufficiently quickly to take Sanballat by surprise.¹¹
 - iii. This undoubtedly testifies to a remarkable feat of organization and leadership, though nothing is said directly about that in the text. It is emphasized, nevertheless, by the evidence presented above, **which suggests that there may have been considerable strains between those of different political and religious outlook among the people who worked on the wall.** ¹²
 - 1. I.e., The people who joined in on the work were not a monolithic group. → There is a picture of the diversity of the people of Israel who are now working for the larger mission together.
 - a. In this list, we see different regions, families, vocations, and social standings listed. → They had their own individual interests.
 - b. We must also remember that family was one of the most important markers in this culture. → There was very little thought of being an individual you were part of a family unit first and foremost. With that, the interests of your family unit were central.
 - c. So, with the mention of each family unit, we can assume that with them came a variety of perspectives, convictions, and motivations.
- c. **Many skills and gifts are still needed today.**
- i. Rom. 12:1-8
 - 1. **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. ² 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. ³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴ For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, ⁵ so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. ⁶ Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; ⁷ if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; ⁸ the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.**
 - ii. Paul is clear in order for the church to accomplish its larger mission (the great commission) it needs each member operating within their own gifting.
 - 1. Paul exhorts believers to present their bodies as living sacrifices (12:1). Paul has already urged believers to “present” their bodies as slaves to God, obedience and righteousness (6:13, 16, 19). **He has also warned against self-centered use**

¹¹ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 211.

¹² H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 211.

- of the body, without the rule of a mind enabled by the Spirit** (1:24; 6:6, 12; 7:24; 8:13).
2. **Now he will show that believers can choose in their minds to present their bodies for the service of a greater “body,”** the body of Christ with whom they have been united.
 - a. And, when believers offer themselves as sacrifices, they imitate Jesus, whose death Paul has already presented as a bloody sacrifice (3:25; 5:9; 8:3)¹³
 3. **Do you remember the consecration language of Nehemiah? They were preparing something sacred and holy, and they themselves were part of something sacred and holy.**
 - a. Paul now uses that same language for us as Christians!
- iii. Our holy offering is joining in on the work!
1. Believers’ renewed minds discern God’s will about how to devote their bodies to God’s service by building up Christ’s body in the various ways that God has made each one capable (12:6–8).¹⁴
 2. **Paul’s central point, however, is that each believer has something to contribute to the proper functioning of Christ’s body.** From this observation it seems not too much to infer that the body would often fail to function properly when individual members fail to recognize their value and contribute their gift, or when other members try to usurp roles not suited for their particular grace or faith.¹⁵
- iv. What gifts do I possess, and am I using them?
1. **Prophecy (preaching)** – It denotes not one who predicts the future, but one who speaks in God’s name and probes the secrets of hearts.¹⁶
 2. **Service** – Someone who is more at home behind the scenes.
 3. **Teaching** – The ability to unpack instruction and ideas in a way that people easily understand and can apply them to their lives. (Teaching sound doctrine.)
 4. **Exhortation** – Mentoring, encouraging, and spurring another on in the faith.
 5. **Generosity** – God gives some the gift of contributing significantly to the work.
 - a. We are all called to give and to be generous.
 6. **Mercy** – The disposition of compassionate care.
- v. If you do not know your gifts:
1. Ask someone who knows you well and get feedback from them.
 2. Take a gifts inventory.
- d. **We have individual gifts... so which one is the greatest? → All**
- i. In another passage on gifts (1 Cor. 12), Paul reminds us that all of the gifts are needed.
 1. **¹² For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. ¹⁴ For the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the**

¹³ Craig S. Keener, *Romans*, New Covenant Commentary Series (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 142-143.

¹⁴ Craig S. Keener, *Romans*, New Covenant Commentary Series (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 145.

¹⁵ Craig S. Keener, *Romans*, New Covenant Commentary Series (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 146.

¹⁶ Joseph A. Fitzmyer S.J., *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 33, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 647.

body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body.¹⁶ And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body.¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell?¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be?²⁰ As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.

- ii. This leads us to another remarkable reality in Nehemiah’s wall project, they worked in unity!

3. Individual work... not Individual visions.

- a. It is nothing short of a miracle that all of these people, with all of their backgrounds, and perspectives could work in unity!
 - i. In fact, the full circle back to the Sheep gate in v.32 shows us the scope of unity that was present.
 - ii. Finally, however, we are brought back to the starting-point of this left-handed tour of the walls, at the *Sheep Gate* which was mentioned at the outset, to find that the high priest and his fellows (1, 2) are working side by side with the craftsmen-artists and the men of trade. **It symbolizes the whole enterprise.**¹⁷
 - 1. **They are all working together for the single purpose of the restoration of Jerusalem.**
- b. Individual visions are the single greatest risk to our interpersonal unity and our unity as a body.
 - i. They were at risk of a clan mentality. → Remember the whole family unit’s importance?
 - ii. We are at risk of a radical individualism mentality. → This is woven into the fabric of the American psyche.
 - 1. Caution – There are great strengths and great weakness to this.
 - a. We have seen significant innovations and projects tackled.
 - b. We have also experienced untold hurt when we make ourselves the center without any consideration.
 - 2. **So often the destructive force that comes in this space is the arbitrary assigning of motive.**
 - a. They did that because...
 - b. They said that because...
 - c. They don’t care about me...
- c. **We are called to work in our giftings to accomplish the greater mission.**
 - i. **What is our mission as a church? → To connect people in life-defining relationships with Christ.**
 - 1. First, this means that we have a commitment to living in community.
 - a. I.e., Following Jesus is not a solo sport.
 - 2. Second, everything we do is to help accomplish that mission.
 - a. If I came up with some out-of-the-box idea, the board would point me back to our mission to refocus me.

¹⁷ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 97–98.

- ii. What is our mission as Christians? → The Great Commission
 - 1. We are to make disciples (Jesus followers / imitators) by baptizing and teaching.
 - a. **Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”** (Matt. 28:19-20)
- iii. **Unity is our goal... Not uniformity.**
 - 1. We are going to have different passions and burdens.
 - 2. We have and need different gifts.
 - 3. The goal is to be about the mission while working out of our own giftings.

4. Generosity not Sass

- a. We would be naive to approach this text as if there wasn't any conflict among those who were working on the wall.
 - i. We will see some of the internal conflict that will come up in chapter five.
- b. Generosity requires selflessness.
 - i. The very length and detail of the list demonstrates the evident willingness unselfishly to cooperate which each individual and group displayed. Without a determination to submit personal pride and ambition to the larger task, the work could never have been accomplished so swiftly and successfully. As will be seen in a moment, this is not by any means to overlook the many points which differentiate one group from another. It is simply to observe that without a common commitment to the specific task in hand, the result would have been a self-defeating chaos.¹⁸
- c. **Pride robs us of the joy of unity. (v.5)**
 - i. No reason is given for the unwillingness of the leaders of the Tekoites to serve. **The form of expression used, however (see Notes), is indicative of a resentment against the new leadership.** This is in no way surprising. The return of exiles from Babylon at any time is bound to have caused tensions with those who had remained in the land, particularly in the matter of relationships with other inhabitants of the land. The location of Tekoa makes likely the influence of Geshem—for good or ill. The viewpoint of Ezra-Nehemiah is such that these tensions are often glossed over or presented in a rather different light (cf. the treatment of mixed marriages). **A verse such as the present one is thus a valuable reminder that sharp differences of opinion within the wider Jewish community were never far beneath the surface.**¹⁹
 - ii. **This is a vivid touch, a glimpse of petty pride rather than half-heartedness.** The unbending *neck* is a standard picture of this unbiddable attitude (e.g. Ps. 75:5, or with a different word, Exod. 32:9), and probably *their Lord* here means 'their supervisors'. (The word is plural, though it could be a plural of majesty referring to God, as RSV implies.) However, if the *nobles* cut a sorry figure (what would Amos, their townsman, have said!) the rest of their community had nothing to be ashamed of: they were responsible for

¹⁸ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 211.

¹⁹ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 204.

two sections of the wall (see verse 27). Nor was there any support for the nobles from others of their status: see e.g. verses 9 and 12.²⁰

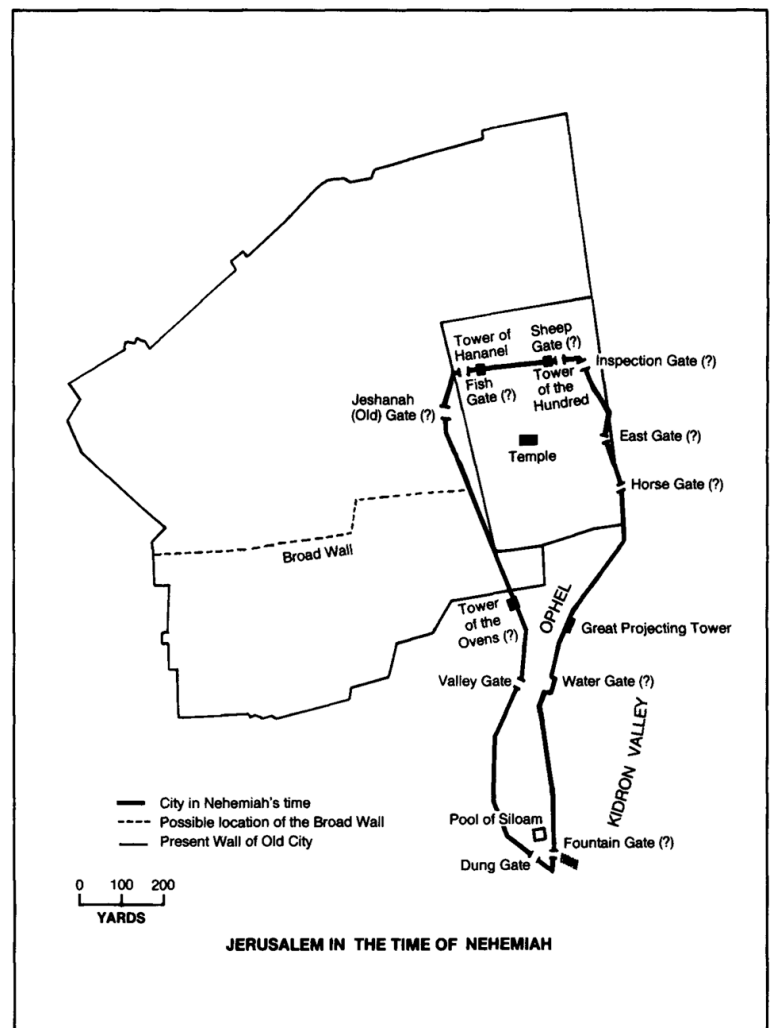
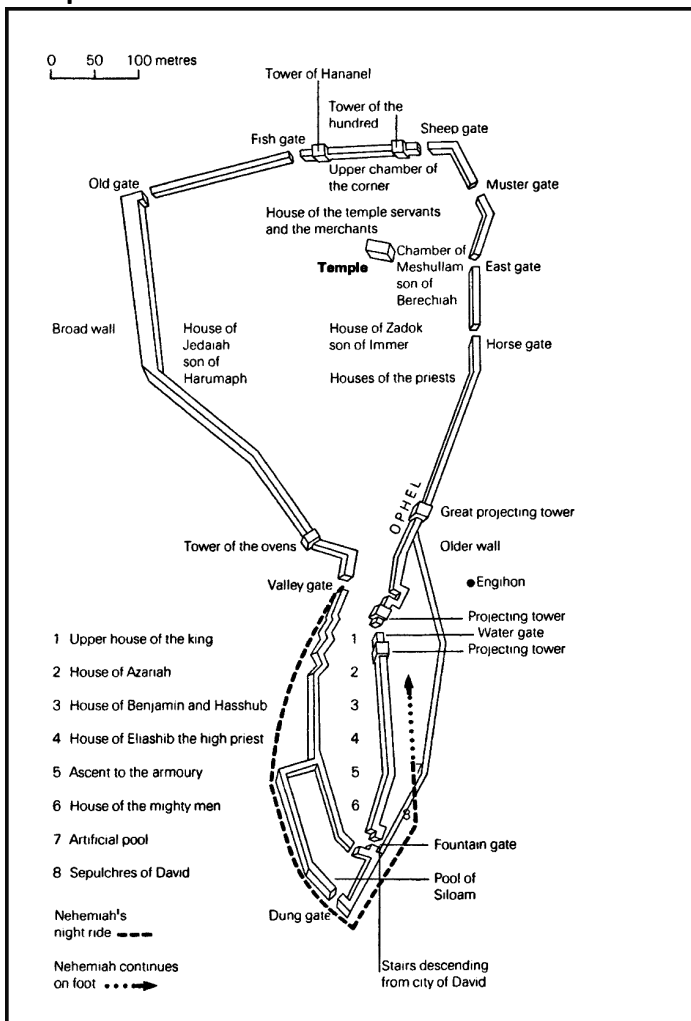
iii. **The simple and clear picture that is painted for us is that those who were unwilling to join in on the work did so out of an unyielding sense of self-interest.**

1. Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it is thinking of yourself less often.
2. Pride is a relentless thinking of self and an overinflation of gifts and abilities.

d. **The only way to work together for something significant long-term is the willingness to be generous with one another. What are we generous with?**

- i. **Grace** – Getting something you do not deserve.
 - ii. **Patience** – longsuffering and enduring with another person
 - iii. **Care** – Seeing another's need and working to meet it according to your ability.
 - iv. **Understanding** – Giving each other the benefit of the doubt until proven otherwise.
- e. The power of this type of unity is that it speaks volumes of the love that resides within us.
- i. Jesus said it this way, “³⁴ **A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.** ³⁵ **By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.**” (Jn. 13:34-35)

Maps of Nehemiah's location and work:



²⁰ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 94–95.