Unity and Collaboration in Restoration Memory Verse: Nehemiah 2:20a

Jan 21, 2024 Scripture Reading: Matthew 28:16-20

SLIDE 1: TITLE

 Today we are continuing with Nehemiah as he embarks on a journey of restoration. Now on it’s face, this is a story about a man who is not okay that his homeland has been destroyed, so he takes it upon himself to return, rally the residents and spearhead a rebuilding effort. Given this plot, we might very well be talking about a Hallmark movie, some feel good drama. But Nehemiah’s effort to restore Jerusalem goes much deeper than a hometown hero story. Jerusalem is his hometown, but it is also God’s hometown as well, the place where God had chosen to dwell. The temple was there, the City of David, God’s highly esteemed king was there, the very heart of the promised land where God’s people were to live. Certainly, Nehemiah’s trip home went deeper than walls. However, walls are where he begins.

 Last week we saw a broken-hearted and dejected Nehemiah doing his job…bearing the king’s cup, testing out the king’s wine, sharing in the latest royal scuttlebutt, being a fly on the wall overhearing all the business and drama of the kingdom. But, by God’s grace, the king notices Nehemiah’s sadness and Nehemiah is allowed to travel back home. Once there, he leaves the weeping behind and he goes into action mode. He takes a little tour of the devastation. He sees for himself the sorry state of the walls that were meant to protect. He then musters the people and declares God’s vision for Jerusalem, repaired walls, a reconstituted city, a restored people. “Let’s start building!”

**SLIDE 2: “Let’s start building!”**

The people cry together. “The God of heaven will give us success!” Nehemiah exclaims, as the camera pans out and the music kicks in for a montage of building scenes, quick shots of people gathering stones, people preparing mortar, people shouting back and forth about what should go where, people wiping the sweat from their brows and stretching out their backs, people smiling and laughing as they encourage one another, as they pursue God’s vision together.

 This is essentially what chapter three is in the story. It’s a montage of quick scenes that gives us a glimpse of the work that is being done and even more importantly, who it is that is doing the work. When we read through chapter three, we basically have a list of names and locations. And as we read this listing, we realize that this montage we are presented with is not at all random scenes cut together, but a deliberate trip around the city of Jerusalem.

Chapter three verse one says: “Then Eliashib the high priest set to work with his fellow priests and built the Sheep gate. They dedicated it and set up it’s doors, then dedicated it as far as the Tower of the Hundred and as far as the Tower of Hananel.”

**SLIDE 3: Nehemiah 3:1**

 If you look in your bulletin you will find a nice little insert that illustrates the perimeter of Jerusalem. At the top, next to the blue arrow you can see the Sheep gate labelled in green. Moving out from the left of that gate we find the two towers described in the verse and a section of wall in between them. This is the area that was repaired by the priests here in verse one.

Let me just read a few more verses here and you can follow along on the map. Nehemiah 3:2-6 READ.

**SLIDE 4: Map**

We could keep going, but you can see the little red hash marks sort of represent each section of the wall as it is mentioned in this chapter. The chapter goes all the way around the perimeter until we get to the end, verse 32, “And between the upper room of the corner and the Sheep Gate, the goldsmiths and the merchants made repairs.” So, it comes full circle and ends again at the Sheep Gate. And please understand, this whole thing is approximate. Scholars do not have exact measurements here; we are not even sure how wide or how tall these walls ended up being. We don’t know how big the gates were, but we do know the work was done and we know who it was done by.

Now, you might be thinking, this is all very interesting but what does it have to do with my life or my faith? I would say what I always say, “Keep reading.” In this case we need to read it again with an eye out for application. We have to keep in mind that we are not the original audience of this story. We have to delve in history a little bit, see what it means to the original audience and then we can pull back and talk about what might apply to you and me in the modern day.

Before we take a closer look, skip ahead with me to Nehemiah chapter 7, in this chapter Nehemiah is registering the families who end up living within the newly walled city.

**SLIDE 5: Names**

As you can see, it is a lot of names and numbers. It is information that again, is not primarily for you and I, so the temptation is to skip it. If I am at home reading my Bible and I come across a list of unpronounceable names, I may as well skip it because I would assume that it does not apply to me. But is that true? Within these lists or these genealogies, these historical accounts, is there something in them for us? It may depend on how hard we are looking.

If we go back to chapter 3, we see a list of names, and which section of the wall they repaired. We see it is a comprehensive list that covers the entire perimeter. But there are more details to glean. As we’ve seen the account begins with the priests. Now the priests already have a job and building walls was not it. They cared for and attended to the altar and the sacrifices and the rest of the temple. But, here they are pitching in with the heavy labor. In verse 8, Uzziel, one of the goldsmiths is making repairs and Hananiah, a perfumer, is working on his section of the wall. In verse 9 the son of the ruler of half the district was busy. In verse 12, the son of the ruler of the other half of the district is at work, along with his daughters. As we go through we see some more families of other rulers and leaders bearing their share of the burden, and in verse 17, the Levites, who were specially chosen by God to lead and run the temple…they too are at work. In verse 28 more priests are listed as working and it’s interesting to note that they were tasked with repairing the section of the wall that was across from the house they lived in. There is some built-in incentive to protect one’s own property even while contributing to the greater cause. If the section I’m in charge of is located right across from my own home, I’m going to do my very best to make that wall as strong as possible. And finally, at the end of the list, there is mentioned goldsmiths again as well as merchants.

So what do we learn from taking a little closer look? We see everyone, men and women, young and old, those of privileged status and those in humble state, no matter who you were, you were working on this wall. God’s vision that Nehemiah communicates for the people was for all the people.

**SLIDE 6: God’s vision that Nehemiah communicates for the people was for all the people.**

No one got to sit around while his neighbor labored. They had a common goal and that unity became more important than any personal concerns.

Now, rebuilding a stone wall, it’s not rocket science, but it does require some skill, some know how. You have to know, for example, how to properly stack stones and how to mix mortar but again, that knowledge gap could be easily bridged since everyone was helping everyone else. How many of you have experienced moving? On one hand you have a cavernous empty truck, on the other a house filled with stuff and stuck in the middle is you and a crew of family and friends, and probably some kids running around. On moving day, there is a sense of determination to get the job done. Naturally, someone with some experience hangs out in the truck to make sure things get packed in an orderly and efficient way. Everyone else is grab and go…next box, next box, next box. Careful with the fragile stuff, don’t scratch the woodwork…Again, it is not rocket science, but it does require some skill and thoughtfulness. Everyone works together and everyone is tired and sweating. But once that truck is filled, there is a moment of collective triumph; high-fives all around. And everyone there knows that they could not have done the job alone. It took a team to make the house empty and the truck full. And after some cold beverages and some pizza, someone breaks the jovial mood by saying, “See you in a few at the new place!” And you realize the whole process now has to be reversed!

Unity, having a shared goal, makes for powerful results. Having everyone in the community on the same team, makes for powerful results. So we see, in Nehemiah’s journey of restoration, he was not just interested in physical walls, we was also restoring the people of God. Through the hard work, there was a unity achieved. Think of a football team who endures grueling practices…Or a regiment of new recruits entering into army boot camp. They suffer and labor together. Their shared experience binds them together. So too with the residents of Jerusalem. They could stand back and be proud of what they had accomplished, knowing full-well it would have been impossible without their unity. As the walls were being restored, so too was the community that had been specially called out by God so long ago, the community that had been destroyed by their enemies, deported and scattered to foreign nations, the community that had lost their identity as God’s people.

We here today, we are God’s people. And, as I mentioned last week, we do not have a wall that needs physical repair, but yet, we do have a mission, we do have a shared goal. And what is that goal? Who is our Nehemiah? Where we see destruction and debris, who comes along to present us with God’s vision for restoration?

For that we do not look to human leaders, to pastors or city council members, to teachers or officials…we must look to Christ. What vision has he laid out for his people? I tend to look to Matthew 28:18. It’s commonly called the Great Commission. It represents God’s goal and our marching orders: “Go and make disciples of all nations. Baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you.”

**SLIDE 7: Matthew 28:18**

That’s the job. Make disciples everywhere. Baptize them. Teach them.

Christ came to this world to do the work of restoration. Through his death and resurrection, our relationship with God is restored, our identity as children of God is restored, and our purpose for this life is restored. And now that we have been restored, we join in the work, we labor and toil, we pitch-in to see the job accomplished which is the restoration of others, the work of bringing others into the fold, into a relationship with God.

And it’s a hard job. Making disciples is fraught with pitfalls and mistakes. It’s not rocket science and yet, it takes some skill, it takes a lot of courage, and it takes a certain “we are filling this truck up before dark” sort of attitude. We will see next week how Nehemiah and the people have to deal with opposition from the surrounding nations. And we will face the same. We will face opposition in this task. Sometimes we will be faced with outright confrontational distain, sometimes with mocking and sarcasm, and most often with a passive indifference…But when we look around, we can see the hurting and suffering, the loneliness, the sadness…We see people in need of restoration. They need to be reacquainted with their God who loves them and gave himself for them.

The church, the body of Christ, this is the means by which this work gets done. What we accomplish collectively we could never do on our own. We can reach people together and provide resources together and I think most importantly provide a family in which people can be restored to their heavenly father. And that family involves each and every one of us: men and women, young and old, those with privilege status and those in a humble state, merchants and goldsmiths and perfumers, priests and leaders, everyone one of us is called to the vision of God.

The methods are not described. But the vision is established: “Go make disciples!”

**SLIDE 8: “Go make disciples!”**

It is my joy to be a part of this community, this family of faith, a body that exists to bring restoration. You and I, we have work to do. It could be leading a class, preparing a lesson, it could be forging a new relationship with a co-worker or neighbor, it could be devotedly bringing concerns before the Lord in prayer or carefully studying God’s word. It could be serving on the Administrative council and addressing specific decisions that need to be made, it could be serving as a greeter, it could be moving tables and chairs, washing dishes, feeding people, volunteering your time in one of our ministries. It could be having the courage to share your faith with somebody or having the courage to confess your sins and struggles with somebody. No one of us could do all these things. We share in this work, we shoulder the burden together. But now, here is the challenge: is there a place of service in which you have grown lax? Where do you sit back a little and leave the work to others? Where do you need to step in and contribute all your strength as one who brings restoration and makes disciples? You are needed in this work! God has a role for you. It’s not rocket science, but it does take some doing.

After Nehemiah shares God’s vision, all God’s people said, (repeat after me) “Let’s start restoring!” The people shouted out together. And let me repeat the words of Nehemiah, “The God of heaven will give us success!” Then all God’s people said, “Amen!”