

Nehemiah: Building a City Within the City, week 4 Leading and Laboring (Nehemiah 3:1–32)

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Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord . . .
— Colossians 3:23

Thus far in the story of Nehemiah, we have seen God break Nehemiah's heart to build both the city of Jerusalem and the church as a city within the city of Jerusalem. After a few months in prayer and planning, Nehemiah secured the approval and resources of the king for the monumental project. Nehemiah then spent a few more months relocating to Jerusalem, where he rested for three days before personally surveying the work before him and casting his vision to the people. He was met with immediate resistance and mockery from his critical enemies.

This week we will examine what is considered by many to be the most boring and irrelevant chapter in the entire book. Some commentary authors find it so tedious that they skip it altogether. But for those who are willing to read chapter 3 carefully and prayerfully, there is much that God will impart to them, because, as Paul says in 2 Timothy 3:16–17, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work" (emphasis added).

The lengthy list of names and projects includes thirty-eight named people along with numerous others whose names are not listed, forty-two separate teams laboring to complete various assigned aspects of the work, all spread across seven neighborhoods in the city marked by their corresponding gates. In this enormous city- and church-building project, we learn many principles regarding people and their leaders.

Insights for Leaders

- Know what game you are playing.
- Build teams on relational, missional, and theological unity.
- Bigger projects require generalists, not specialists.
- Deputize trustworthy people and trust them.
- Connect your air war and your ground war.
- Work *on* the organization, not just *in* it.
- Look for old stones.

Insights for People

- God works through people.
- All work is holy if done unto the Lord.
- Leaders must lead (3:1).
- Some people refuse to work (3:5).
- Some people do more than others (3:11, 3:19, 3:21, 3:24, 3:27, 3:30).
- Some people work from home (3:10, 3:23, 3:28–30).

- Some people work harder than others (3:20).
- Families often work together.
- Some work is less desirable than others (e.g., Dung Gate).
- Recruiting people from the outside is necessary (men of Jericho, people from the outlying cities of Tekoa, Gibeon, Mizpah, Zanoah, Beth Hukkerem).
- A diverse team is the most desirable (e.g., priests, skilled craftsmen [3:8, 3:31–32], city officials, women [3:12], bachelors [3:12], temple servants/deacons [3:26, 3:31], security guards [3:29], business leaders [3:32])

As Jesus continues to work through the people of Mars Hill to build both the city and our church as His city within our city, there is much to be learned from the book of Nehemiah. In reading a long list of names in chapter 3, it is vital that we see how God acknowledges and even honors the hard work of those who love Him and labor to make His name great. Thankfully, were I to write down the names of those who are serving Jesus faithfully on our mission, I would be unable to contain the thousands of names in one chapter. God has richly blessed us with some very humble people who have put their hand to the plow that our harvest may continue in one of America's least church cities, a city that has lain in spiritual ruins since its founders landed in 1851. The words of Ephesians 2:8–10 are encouraging for we have been saved by Jesus and saved to His good works in our city: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."

Verses for next week: Nehemiah 4:1–14