

# A life of service

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]      Keep your Bibles open there at Nehemiah. We're actually going to kick off at Nehemiah 3, and then move into 4. So let's pray as we do that. Gracious Father, we stand on the promise of the Lord Jesus that we were reminded of last week, where he said that he would build his church through the confession that Christ is Lord.

And we pray, Father, that as we open up your word now, that you would send your spirit, and that you would be about the building of your church now. So plant your word deep in our hearts, we pray in Jesus' name.

Amen. Individualism is the mindset that dominates our value system in the Western world. It even influences the way we approach our relationship with God.

The result is what you might call Lone Ranger Christianity. Lone Ranger Christianity thinks in terms of personal salvation, but doesn't think in terms of the people of God.

In his book, Stop Dating the Church, Falling in Love with the Family of God, Josh Harris profiles a Lone Ranger Christian. He calls them a church dater. He says, First, the attitude towards church tends to be me-centered.

[ 1 : 1 8 ]      We go for what we get, social interaction, programs, activities. The driving question is, what can church do for me? The second sign of a church dater is being independent.

We go to church because that's what Christians are supposed to do. But we're careful to avoid getting involved too much, especially with people. We don't pay much attention to God's larger purposes for us as a vital part in a specific church family.

We go through the motions without really investing ourselves. Most essentially, he says, the church dater tends to be critical. We are short on allegiance and quick to find fault in our church.

We treat church with a customer mentality, looking for the best product for the price of our Sunday. And as a result, he says, we're fickle and not invested for the long term.

Like a lover with a wandering eye, always on the hunt for something better. Church dater will not make a whole lot of sense of the book of Nehemiah.

[ 2 : 2 5 ]      Among the many strengths of Nehemiah is the passion he displays and fosters for the people of God. As I said last week, Nehemiah is about rebuilding the people of God, even as he seeks to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

And the rebuilding of the walls was a huge task. It was more than one and a half kilometers long, over one and a half meters thick and four to six meters high. So it's a bit more than a fence.

Rebuilding Jerusalem's walls had to be seen as a corporate responsibility of the people of God. Nehemiah could not do it by himself.

And this corporate responsibility, in the end, was the problem. Notice at the end of chapter two, we read it but didn't kind of get into it much last week. Nehemiah takes a secret tour of the walls of Jerusalem, middle of the night kind of thing.

Why does he do a secret tour? Well, I think we can say with a fair degree of confidence that comatose is a fitting description of God's people in Jerusalem at this time.

- [ 3 : 37 ] There was a total lack of vision and vitality as far as service to God was concerned. And so Nehemiah's concern was not so much just the people outside of Jerusalem, but even the people that are in Jerusalem.
- And what they're going to think about this project that he had been called to do and whether or not they'll just say no. And he was worried about it because they've been there for a hundred years.
- The first exiles returned a hundred years earlier. They've had a hundred years to rebuild these walls and they lay in ruins. They came back from exile and in their own little family units, they built their homes and their farms and their businesses.
- They forgot that God's purpose to display his glory to the world from Jerusalem. Jerusalem. And that's when you move into chapter three in this long list of names.
- It's actually, it's the commencement of the building work. And it's a really exciting read. I know at first glance it doesn't appear to be, but it's a really exciting read.
- [ 4 : 47 ] The real building of Jerusalem is a symbol of the people starting to pursue God's eternal purposes and not their own personal advancement or the advancement of their families, which is what they've been doing for a hundred years.
- Now, rather than go through verse by verse, I'm going to make a few observations. So we need to be at Nehemiah 3 if you're not quite there yet in your Bible. We see their immediate priority in verse 1.
- Eliashib, the high priest and fellow priests, went to work and rebuilt the Sheep Gate. And they dedicated it and set its doors in place.
- It's quite symbolic that they start the rebuilding at the Sheep Gate. And eventually they come back around to the Sheep Gate. This gate is near the wall's northeastern corner and it was the easiest access to the temple.
- And it was named the Sheep Gate because that's where the animals were brought through to sacrifice in the temple for the sins of the people. And by starting here, it's symbolically saying we are now going to put God first.
- [ 5 : 54 ] Our relationship with God is going to come first. A very important symbolic statement from a people who are coming out of apathy and inertia in service of God.
- Notice 2 in chapter 3, the unity in which the people work. The priests set a good example by ripping off their robes and lugging stones and timber and building the gate themselves.
- It's a symbol that what we see as we go through here, the teamwork is just so needed for this job. People from a variety of backgrounds and trades and places all chip in to get this wall built.
- And they do it together. See how the list reads. Verse 2, the men of Jericho built the adjoining section and Zucur son of Imri built next to them. Verse 4, Merimoth repaired the next section.
- Next to him, Meshulam. And next to him, Zadok. And on it goes. Next to him. Next to them. Next to him. Until verse 30. Now I suspect there must have been some wall building experts in the team somewhere to guide the project.
- [ 7 : 04 ] But the workers who get mentioned are the priests in verses 1 and 28. The goldsmith in verses 8, 31 and 32. Perfume makers in verse 8.
- Merchants in 32. District rulers, probably like a mayor kind of person. In verses 9, 12 and 14 to 19. And in verse 12, Shalom had the help of his daughters.
- Great memory verse for those of us who have just got girls. Sacrificial service was rendered by men and women who threw themselves into the enterprise even though they were totally lacking in experience as builders or laborers.

And it's because of this common unity of purpose. These people are not coming and saying, I'll do my bit but providing I do it my way. It's not like one guy builds a wall.

Beside him someone's constructing a fence. Beside him someone's building a flower bed. Beside him, oh actually that guy's just gone on holidays. When he gets back he'll do his bit however he likes it.

[ 8 : 13 ] In his time, when he feels led, when he gets around to it and after he's cut his own grass. They're working together. The whole thing would be doomed to failure if their ranks became disrupted by rivalry and pride and individualism.

It seems I think that when I glance through here, Nehemiah experienced what would be any pastor's delight in building up the family of God. Here I am.

How can I help? And how do you want me to do it? It's such a wonderful picture in chapter 3 of selflessness. Quite remarkable for a people who returned from exile and basically just pursued their own agendas.

Volunteers came from Jericho, verse 2, Toccoa, verse 5, Gibeon, verse 7, Mispah in 7, 15 and 19, Zenoa in verse 13, Ben-Hakarim, Beth-Hakarim in verse 14, Beth-Zer in 16 and Keelah in 17 and 18.

These people had their own paddocks to cultivate, their own sheep to tend, their own shops to look after. And instead, they left their homes and their families, came to Jerusalem to offer themselves to rebuild the walls.

[ 9 : 32 ] Notice 2 in verse 4, Merrimoth completed one part of the wall and then we see him pop up again in verse 21, repairing another section of the wall. Same with Mishlam in verse 4, he did this, pops up again in verse 31.

They enthusiastically went the extra mile. There's no sense of, whoop, there you go, done my bit, over to you guys. It's now time for some other generation to take care of it or some other people to look after it.

It seems that they regarded their work on the wall not as a chore, but as a privilege. A priceless opportunity. God had done so much for them and there was an opportunity to live and labor in gratitude.

I think it's the same selflessness and gratitude that you read in 2 Corinthians 8. That resulted in the Macedonian churches urgently pleading with Paul to allow them the privilege of sharing in the service to the saints in Jerusalem.

Which what it meant for them was that they wanted to sacrificially give to the church in Jerusalem. A bunch of people who they've probably never met. Why did they do such a thing?

[ 10 : 52 ] Because right at the beginning of 2 Corinthians 8 we are told it's because of the grace of the Lord Jesus. And at least for some people on this wall, their selflessness and their generosity was a privilege because they had been forgiven of serious mistakes in the past.

Take for example verse 11, Maokiah son of Haram. He was one of the men who had disobeyed God by marrying a foreign wife.

And he had been convicted of covenant unfaithfulness under Ezra's ministry 13 years earlier in Ezra chapter 10 verse 25. And he'd put the matter right.

He's been convicted of covenant unfaithfulness under Ezra chapter 10 verse 25. And he's been convicted of covenant unfaithfulness under Ezra chapter 10 verse 25. And now he is mentioned here rebuilding Jerusalem's walls, reaffirming his commitment to the covenant God and his promises.

This selfless and enthusiastic partnership is an example of what the people of God have done over the centuries in response to God's grace to them in the Lord Jesus.

[ 11 : 59 ] Friends, every week, dedicated prayer partners spend hours earnestly praying for some country that they'll never visit. Millions of Christians sacrificially give money for projects that they will never see or ministry that they will never personally experience the benefit of.

No personal benefit to them other than the privilege of participation and doing it for their Lord. Those who love Christ have been liberated from the curse of selfishness and individualism and found their greatest joy in serving others in the service of the Lord.

And if I may just use, just go offside here just for a moment. And that I believe is what we are, we've been calling us to do as a church here.

Our own building project is but just one opportunity that we have to selflessly sacrifice for the sake of others. I'm calling us to put a fair bit of effort and resources into a project that many other people will get the benefit of.

That is, selflessness means we give for the sake of others, not just if there's some personal benefit to me. For instance, put your hand up now if you were here when they built this building that we're sitting in right now.

[ 13 : 43 ] There was a few people in the morning congregation who put their hand up. And I said, leave your hand up if you paid for the building this morning. And one person put their hand up.

And I said, did you pay for it all? No, not at all. But aren't you glad that some parish council and there were ministers and parish councils and people and builders who envisaged it and went with it and paid for it and we sit here and we have the benefit of it.

Sacrificial service from people in the past. And we get the benefit of it. The St. Paul's Church family stands on the shoulders of over 110 years of sacrifice for God's people in this place.

Now I'm not just talking in terms of generations past sacrifice for buildings. I'm talking about for people. I know the person who witnessed to me and displayed the glory of the Lord Jesus to me.

But I don't know the person who did it to him. And I'm so glad he did. Chapter 3 is a wonderful picture of unity and sacrifice.

[ 14 : 57 ] And yet the note of realism is not missing. It's quite painful to read that not everyone came rushing forward with their picks and shovels. The leading citizens of Tekoa were well aware of the need, but they refused to roll up their sleeves.

It says in verse 5, The next section was repaired by the men of Tekoa. Woohoo! But their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors.

That is, they weren't prepared to get in and do their bit under someone else. I'll do it, provided I do it my way.

And it suggests that it was pride rather than inability that kept them from the work. This working bee in Jerusalem was, well, it was below them. Pride is a cruel enemy.

It inflates our self-importance and makes holiness impossible. And pride is at the heart of selfishness. A further dose of realism comes in chapter 4, which was just read out to us by Tim.

[ 16 : 09 ] That menacing duo that I said, let's remember these guys because we're going to see them again. They reappear here. They're from chapter 2. So let's have a look from verses 1 and 3.

When Sambalat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews and in the presence of his associates in the army of Samaria, he said, What are those feeble Jews doing?

Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from these heaps of rubble, burned as they are? And standing beside him is Tobiah the Ammonite.

He's hearing the taunts of his mate Sambalat and he comes in. He says, yeah, yeah. What they're building? If a fox climbed up on it, it would just fall over. Yeah, take that.

They start with the ridicule. What a joke. What a joke. Look at them. Priests and goldsmiths and perfume makers. It's going to look good.

[ 17 : 12 ] It's going to smell good. But stick a squirrel on it and what a joke. Now, the verbal taunts are one thing, but they're followed by the plots in verse 8.

To come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. To bring this project to a standstill, they're going to need more than just verbal taunts. They're going to need to be supplemented with dangerous weapons.

And verse 2 says that Sambalat was accompanied by the army of Samaria. Verse 7 says, Tobiah, the Arabs, and the Ammonites, and the men of Ashdod were also plotting against them.

What that means is that as they built the wall in Jerusalem, they were surrounded by armies. It's one thing to hear the taunts.

It's another thing to have sweat dripping off your bowels, your brows being hammering and chipping and carrying on and lumping stones. And look up from your work, stretch your back and just see armies.

[ 18 : 18 ] Verse 11 reveals the clear and present danger before they know it or see us.

We will be right there among them and we will kill them and put an end to the work. And so verse 10, we see the discouragement that God's people felt.

And this is exactly what the enemy wanted to see happen. It says, 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.

And if the people, the workers in Jerusalem didn't have enough to cope with, they get some more issues to deal with. In verse 11, it says, the people in Judah, men and women from the surrounding villages and towns, came to Nehemiah grieving about the dangers that their families were exposed to in the countryside.

The enemy had threatened to attack the homes and the families of the men who were building the walls. And those threats and propaganda were there repeated to the workers on the wall.

[ 19 : 29 ] See it there in verse 12. These people are coming and the Jews who lived near them came and told us, 10 times over, wherever you turn, they will attack us.

10 times over. It's like they're coming to Nehemiah and saying, Nehemiah, a lot of people are saying, Nehemiah, a lot of people are unhappy with this.

It's gossip and it's propaganda that is designed to discourage. It threatens to unravel the unity and the focus and the purpose of this work. These Jews were coming and urging their fellow countrymen to abandon the work on the walls simply because it was physically exhausting.

There were practical problems. There were hostile opponents. They considered the task too hard and the sacrifice too much. And so in verses 13 to 23, we get Nehemiah's organized perseverance.

Far from abandoning the work when it got tough, what Nehemiah does is he calls for more sustained effort. He turns the heat up. He doesn't call a holiday break, long weekend.

[ 20 : 48 ] He gets them to work harder. People were placed in the most vulnerable positions on the wall. Swords and spears were carried with buckets and shovels and picks.

Nehemiah had a permanent guard placed with him. He installed an alarm system. Shifts were extended so that they worked until the stars came out. And there would be no more commuting to work.

As they were now required to live, sleep, eat, the whole lot on the work site. Those working on the wall from outside of Jerusalem were now needed.

When you finished your shift on the wall, you were now needed for guard duty. And Nehemiah himself didn't even change his clothes. I don't know what that would have smelled like. But he's leading by example.

And God uses the opposition to increase the work. Nehemiah's confidence was not, however, in his organizational ability to meet the immediate crisis or the greater effort that everyone was going to put in.

[ 21 : 56 ] His confidence was in God. See it there in verse 14? Fear is conquered by reflecting on the sufficiency of the promise-keeping God.

Nehemiah calls the people to remember the Lord. He uses the words of his opening prayer in chapter 1 verse 5 when he first heard of Jerusalem's plight.

Do not forget that our God is a great and awesome God. The narrative of chapter 4 with its problems and dangers is deliberately interspersed with affirmations of faith and confidence in the God of heaven.

And so with such confidence in God, Nehemiah and his colleagues continue to build despite verbal assault, psychological pressure, physical danger, natural discouragement, difficult work, crippling fear and extreme danger.

The people worked hard, organized well, sacrificed much, but in the last analysis, the success would depend upon their great and awesome God. We read last week in Matthew 16 of Jesus' commitment to build his church.

[ 23 : 37 ] He said, Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

Jesus promises there, as I said last week, in person to build his church, and it will triumph over all forms and powers of death and evil and wickedness.

He will build his church as the truth about him is declared and received as people respond to the Lord Jesus in repentance and faith. That is how he will build his church.

And our confidence ought to be that as the truth of Jesus is declared, Jesus will do his work and bring people to repentance and faith.

Do we have that confidence that that's what he will do? Let me just say that again. Do we have that confidence that that is what he will do?

[ 24 : 40 ] I find it hard. I find it hard to have that confidence week after week after week after week. And yet just tonight, someone told me a story about someone who committed their faith to the Lord Jesus when I preached this event in 2007.

Just heard about it tonight. Praise God. He's doing what he said he'll do. Jesus also said this earlier in Matthew.

I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore, be as shrewd as snakes and as innocents as doves. Jesus never promised that the building of the church, that the Christian life, the mission of the church, would be painless and trouble-free.

Expect it to be hard. Expect opposition to the gospel. Expect to sacrifice. Expect hard work. Expect discouragement from within the church and pressure from outside the church.

But don't be repelled by it. God will use it to advance his work in us and in others. We should expect that Jesus will build his church as he promised.

[ 25 : 56 ] The local church is where God's eternal purposes are being worked out in his world. People are still being saved by Christ and growing in Christ, even amongst us and even in the last few weeks.

Praise God for that. For those here who have been saved by Christ and included in his eternal purposes and get to work, you get to work for something that will last forever.

All service and sacrifice and hardship for Christ and his church should be seen as a privilege. The church is the vehicle that God chose to take the message of the gospel to every generation and people and even to the heavenly realms.

This is how the apostle Paul puts it in Ephesians 3 verses 10 to 11 right before he talks about unity and partnership in the church. He says this, His intent was that now through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known, displayed to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms according to his eternal purpose, which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The church matters because God chose it to show and tell the eternal message of his love and salvation.

[ 27 : 22 ] This message is the world's only hope. And so if you're a Christian, then your life is so much bigger than a job. It's so much bigger than an understanding spouse.

It's so much bigger than having non-delinquent kids or a beautiful house and gardens. It's so much bigger than overseas trips and nice clothes and cars. And you are part of something immense.

It is something that began before you were born and it was something that will continue after you die. God is rescuing fallen humanity, transporting them into his kingdom and progressively shaping them into his likeness.

And he's called you to be part of it. God not only saves us, but includes us for our joy as part of his master plan for all of eternity.

This is our duty, our calling and our privilege. Isn't it just like God that he should design the church so that we get the joy of loving and being loved and he gets the glory for the goal of it all?

[ 28 : 41 ] This is where our core value of treasuring Jesus is so essential for us. Let me read it to you. Core values are meant to shape the culture of who we are as a people.

And here's one of them. Treasuring Jesus together. Having been led individually by the Spirit of God to receive Jesus Christ as the Lord, Saviour and Supreme Treasure of our lives, we now most solemnly and joyfully enter into covenant with one another as one body in Christ.

We believe the people whom Jesus has called into relation with himself are his church and not an institution or a building. In an age of individualism, we value vigilance and accountability in treasuring Jesus together.

And therefore, we are committed to our corporate life, ministries and church policies to give explicit evidence that we treasure Jesus Christ above everything.

Making corporate worship a weekly priority. Meeting together in small groups for more intimate opportunities for nurture and service. Small groups being the main network for discipleship and pastoral care and relationships.

[ 29 : 51 ]    Treasuring Jesus together by engaging to watch over one another in brotherly love.  
Remembering one another in prayer. Aiding one another in sickness and distress.  
Cultivating Christian sympathy and joy.

Being courteous in speech. Being slow to take offense, but always ready for reconciliation.  
And mindful of the command of our Saviour to secure it without delay.

Welcoming people from every background. Openness towards new people and the  
avoidance of cliquishness. Purging our lives of the sin that causes division.

Pursuing increasingly visible, authentic, practical ways of loving each other. And being  
personally involved in one ongoing ministry toward building up the St. Paul's family  
according to our gifts.

For those amongst us who are living out, treasuring Jesus together, I just want to say  
thank you. Thank you for helping me keep my focus on the glory and the purpose of God.

[ 30 : 59 ]    Thank you for investing in me, in my life, and in the life of my family, and the life of the St.  
Paul's church family. For those struggling with it, can I say for your own soul and for God's  
glory, this core value calls you to step away from individualism and seek the  
Christ-exalting joy of treasuring Jesus together for His glory and the joy, not just of  
yourself, but the joy of all people.

Amen.