

Nehemiah 3:1-32 --- God gathers and employs his people for his work.

Introduction: Commencing God's good work.

Every now and again a movie gives us a glimpse of a lifetime in just a few moments. You know those scenes in a movie, when the narrative gives way, the music rises, and the images roll past quickly. And somehow a montage can tell more of the story than any amount of dialogue ever could. **(SLIDE)** You might remember the montage from the movie *Up*, about the married life of Carl and Ellie. From a young married couple fixing their house and sharing dreams together, to heartbreak and silence. And within a few minutes of the start of the movie, you have already been taken on a journey which sets up everything that is to follow. A good montage doesn't tell you everything that happened. But it tells you just enough to feel the real weight and depth of the story, and see its significance.

Nehemiah chapter three is a passage that can be hard to understand. The narrative and plot of the rest of the book fade, and we get a historical record and just a glimpse into the daily life of God's people. But, can you imagine the music coming in, and the images of the grotty faces of the people building the wall? Of Melatiah lifting his face in front of the setting sun placing the last stone for the day, or the sons of Hassenaah in front of the Fish Gate, laying stones in the hot sun.

I believe it's helpful to see Nehemiah chapter three in this way, like a montage for the rest of Nehemiah. We cover a lot of ground, get a description of the city limits, get a quick glimpse into who built the wall, all without the main story. But don't worry, regular programming of the tormenting trio and Nehemiah's response *will* return next week.

With that in mind, I'd like to ask a question. What do you think of this passage now that you've read it? What would you be thinking of it now if you'd just read it through in a morning devotion? Our passage this morning lacks a narrative, and at the face of it, appears to lack any specific teaching. This passage can be hard to understand because it's easy to simply pass it over. It is, after all, a list of names, another list in the series of lists in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

This may be an unglamorous text, but if we believe, as it says in 2 Timothy, chapter 3 that "All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness. (2 Timothy 3:16-17, cf. Ezra 7:10) Then the challenge for us this morning is to wrestle with how we understand the teaching of a passage like this. If all you walk away with this morning, is that next time you come across a passage like this you will linger there and glean what you can from it, then I will be content. And this morning we get some time to linger *here*, to understand this passage in the context of God's saving grace, and to have a better understanding of the purpose of this passage in Nehemiah. **(SLIDE)**

We're going to focus on two things from our text this morning. They are, that God employs all people for his good work, and secondly it is God who gathers together people from all walks of life. So as we turn to the text, and look into the montage that is this chapter, we will see that this isn't just a picture of how God acted in his people here, but how God always acts through his people.

God employs all people for his work

Last week we heard about the grace that was given to Nehemiah and the people living in Jerusalem, and the good works that Nehemiah, having planned, then committed to achieve with all the officials, in Nehemiah two, verse 18, it says ““Let us rise up and build,” and their hands were strengthened to do this good work”. (Nehemiah 2:18) And so, this week we're going to look at the character of this good work, in the building of the wall. We heard the commitment of the people, “we will rise up and build.” (v. 2:18) And chapter three continues with that same phrase.

Let's read verse one, **(SLIDE)** “Then Eliashib the high priest *rose up* with his brothers the priests, and *they built* the Sheep Gate.” There is a continuity in the story here, and so this *good work* that Clint was preaching about last week commences here with the people rising to the task of building of the wall. In those times, a wall around a city provided economic prosperity and protection. Protection from attack, from thieves, but a wall around a city also controlled commerce and allowed for trade to happen peacefully within the confines of the walls. In many ways, this wall is not a symbol of, but is a true separation for the people of God from the surrounding nations. It separated them in their identity as a nation and separated them to worship as they desired.

Working together (Next to him / after him)

As you were listening to the passage read this morning---and you might never have heard it read aloud before---I wonder if you picked up on any of the repeated phrases? **(SLIDE)** Starting in verse nine: “Next to them Rephaiah son of Hur ... made repairs. After them Jedaiah son of Harumaph made repairs ...” and later in the chapter, “After him Baruch son of Zabbai ... repaired ... After them Benjamin and Hasshub made repairs.” (Nehemiah 3:9-10, 20-22)

I want to draw your attention to those repeated phrases, that is “next to him” and “after him”. This is a description of how they built the wall, but it's also a picture of how they had to work together, it's the outworking of that excellent pre-planning of Nehemiah in the dark of night from chapter two. They had their assigned portions from Nehemiah, their assigned section of the wall. Rebuilding the wall like this in 52 days was only ever going to be achieved if they worked alongside each other.

Different abilities/exertion (in front of house, two sections)

But you will also notice that they also repaired as they had ability. **(SLIDE)** While some travelled long distances as we have heard, others repaired right outside their house (vv. 10, 23, 28-29). There are also those who commit to rebuild a second section in addition to their first (vv. 11, 19-21, 24, 27, 30). Even the people of Tekoa built multiple sections, despite their own stubborn nobles. **(SLIDE)** And one man Baruch, mentioned in verse twenty, built another section “diligently”. In the previous chapter we learned of Nehemiah's and Judah's dependence on God. In this chapter we learn about the dependence of the people on each other. So, this good work of wall building was completed by working together, and with a variety of ability and exertion. (cf. Matt 25:14-30)

In a former life, as my job, I used to work on mobile phone towers all over Australia. We would travel large distances, climb towers, and bolt equipment to them to improve the mobile service in the area. I have been to remote islands, remote

deserts, but the biggest risk to these jobs was not the weather, not the distances, or the risk of forgetting even one small bolt or connector. It was not the management of the job, but the management of the humans. It was amazing how many problems can be overcome by a team working together, but all you would need is one member of the team who wanted to work through and finish the job earlier, and another member who wanted regular breaks for food and rest, and the whole job would be put in jeopardy, simply from a lack of the team cohesion and the team working together. Teamwork really does make the dreamwork.

Now, I want to be clear, this was for my occupation. In the church we don't manage humans, it's not what we are about. But we do serve our brothers and sisters, and the point about working together is even more paramount as we wrestle with our own sin. No Sunday service, or roster can be so bulletproof as to cause a church to endure unless the members work to serve one another. Unless the Lord builds the house, the workers labour in vain. (Psalm 127:1)

I did something recently that I hadn't done for a while. I looked up a word in a concordance, they are a useful tool. I looked up all the instances of the 'One Another' phrases in the New Testament, and these passages all speak on how the church is to work with and build up one another. Out of the 54 times it is used, eighteen of them are commands that we the church should love one another. And here are some more ways in which we should look to treat one another; **(SLIDE)**

Be at peace with one another (Mark 9:50), Take the lead in honouring one another (Rom 12:10), build up one another (Rom 14:19), welcome one another (1 Cor 11:33), serve one another through love (Gal 5:13), Carry one another's burdens (Gal 6:2), be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another (Eph 4:32), and as we heard from our NT reading this morning, bearing with one another in love (Eph 4:2).

You see, just as those in Judah gathered for one purpose of building the wall, we too gather for one purpose, to reach unity in the faith, and the knowledge of God's son, growing into maturity with a stature measured by Christ's fullness, but we can't do this without doing it together. So, as you sit here this morning, maybe you are thinking that there is more you can be doing. Or perhaps your mind is wandering to lunch, or an / the kids' afternoon nap. Or perhaps you are thinking about the missed opportunities at work to discuss Jesus with your colleagues. Or maybe as you look around the church, you are seeing the faces of brothers and sisters you haven't spoken to or prayed for in a while.

I don't know about you, but sometimes I find myself thinking that I need to invest in myself, work harder to bear the responsibility of the gospel at home, at work.

But we are called to this good work of the gospel, and Jesus says he will build his church (Matt 16:18, Eph 2:19-20) **(SLIDE)** So persevere in loving your brothers and sisters, persevere in bearing one another's burdens, and doing this as God gives your ability, this is how God grows his church, through mutual dependence on him, and his ordinary works of grace. Just as God's people worked together to build the wall, let us labour together as in the places God has called us to.

(SLIDE) As you persevere you show what God is doing in your life, how Jesus' grace is sufficient for you. When we do this, the whole church gets a share in how much we are all dependant on God for his grace, and we get a richer understanding of the

various ways God calls us all to live; to equip the saints for the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ, until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God's Son, growing into maturity with a stature measured by Christ's fullness. (Ephesians 4:11-13)

God gathers his people from all walks of life.

(SLIDE) We have seen *how* God employed his people for his work through whatever ability they have, now we will take a closer look at who these people were. Our second point that we will turn to now is that it is God who gathers his people from all walks of life.

Come from different places (farms, towns/cities)

As we read through Nehemiah, you may have noticed that there are several place names mentioned. People come from Jericho, Tekoa, Gibeon, Mizpah, and more people from Zanoah, Beth-haccherem, Beth-zur, and Keilah. You might have also heard the phrase, "district of", or "the half district of" (vv. 9, 12, 14-18). All of these places mentioned are regional towns, or councils if you like, from in and around Jerusalem. Now in an agrarian society, not everybody lived in the city, later in Nehemiah we hear that one in ten come to live in the city, so there was plenty of people that needed to live out on the land. Some have come from up to 32km from around the city of Jerusalem, leaving behind their farms and flocks, and in some cases even their families.

Come from different families (single/plural)

(SLIDE) And you'll also notice that there many different groups, different social groups. Now I said before this was a list of names, but really this can be seen a list of families and towns. You will notice that sometimes some of those people mentioned are referred to by the singular "him", and others the plural "them" is used, and there are a few places that are grammatically incorrect (v. 4-5, 7-8, 10). This just shows us that it was not one person, but clans or families that would have built sections together, we also see this clearly with the mention of Shallum and his daughters in verse twelve (v. 12).

Come from different social groups (nobles, priests, workers)

But we also see people of all different levels of society, there are nobles and rulers (vv. 9-12), that come to build the wall. There are also priests and Levites. We read about the priests and high priest in verse one, but we also see the priests again later (v. 28), the Levites (v. 12), and the temple servants (v. 26) as well. There are also the working class, we don't get an exhaustive list of skills, in verses eight and thirty one, we also see that there are goldsmiths repairing, and there are perfumers, and merchants. So as we look through the people in this chapter, we see clearly that God gathered these people from all these different areas, and from all levels of society. The description may not be exhaustive, but it is a brief cross-section of their society. They all had a diversity of interests. Some were farmers, some were priests, some lived in the city.

But they were gathered for this single purpose in building the walls around the temple, God's dwelling place, and the holy city, Jerusalem.

Lives of the people through generations

Continuing with our picture of the life of people in Judah, we also get a glimpse of some of the life experiences that brought them there. Something I've enjoyed while reading through the books of Ezra and Nehemiah in preparing for this sermon is seeing the generations of the people. It was nearly 90 years earlier from this point that the first exiles came back from Persia to Judah. As you read through Ezra, we read of the grandfathers and the fathers of those people that are mentioned in our chapter. **(SLIDE)** And so, in verse four and 21 we read about Meremoth, son of Uriah, son of Hakkoz, who rebuilt two sections. Meremoth's grandfather, Hakkoz, was disqualified from the priesthood due to lacking a traceable ancestral heritage in Ezra chapter two (Ezra 2:62), but later Meremoth would become a priest himself, and was entrusted with the care of the gold vessels back in Ezra chapter 8 (Ezra 8:33), Malchijah, the son of Haram. Who had made a previous list in Ezra, because he had married a foreign wife. Which had become a large problem for this returned community. For fear of falling back into the ways of Ahab or Solomon's idolatry was seen as a very real threat, and something they had previously "dealt with". But here regardless of his past, Malchijah joins into the work with the rest. This is the montage, the picture of these people that were there to build the wall, a glimpse into who they are.

We see that it is God who gathers his people, God who brings them together. We know from last week that this was not their own doing but God's. (Neh 2:18-20) The books of Ezra and Nehemiah, represent a high point in this restoration of Jerusalem, the walls and temple are rebuilt and the people have joy and hope. They have a singular purpose, a singular focus, their present desperation will become their joy at the dedication of the wall and temple later in Nehemiah (vv. 12:27-43).

It reminds me of an orchestra. An orchestra is a gathering of a very many instruments. Not only are there many instruments in an orchestra, they are also broken up into the string section, the brass section, percussion and woodwind. Various instruments all gathered around a single theme, in different groups so they can be accompanied by others with similar sound. All the instruments playing different notes brings about a harmony and an accord, and the orchestra produces a symphony.

God gathered these people of Judah together in the desperation for protection; in the desperation for identity, and they stood with one accord. Yet, we will see later that there is some resistance to God's gathering, as comfort sets in so does pride and arrogance. We will hear later in the sermon series that Eliashib, the high priest and de facto spiritual leader of the people, is all caught up in the people of the land, whose grandson becomes a son-in-law to Sanballat, one of the tormenting trio!, and Eliashib abuses his privilege by renting out a room in the temple to his relative (vv. Neh 13:4-9, 28). Therefore, some 450 years later, as this trend in Judah's leadership continues, Jesus would look upon this very city, this restored city of Jerusalem, but he is not rejoicing, he is weeping. **(SLIDE)** Matthew records Jesus as he weeps and says, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem ... how often I would have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her broods under her wings, and you were not willing." (Matt 23:37-39, Luk 19:41-44) You see, this orchestra was gathered here at this time by God, but in time they stopped playing in harmony, and eventually stopped playing altogether. And so, we see the clear need for Christ to hold his people together.

And regarding this need for Christ, we have in verse 1 this image of the Sheep Gate. we read there, "[they] began rebuilding the Sheep Gate. They dedicated it and installed its doors." (Neh 3:1). In many ways the Sheep Gate was just another of the nine gates built along with the wall. Yet, this was the only gate that was dedicated, an act normally reserved for the temple, and those things set aside for being in God's presence. In the gospel of John Jesus declares himself to be the Gate for the

Sheep (John 10:1-18). So what was the Sheep Gate? The Sheep Gate is called that because it is near to the temple, and it was the gate through which thousands of sheep would be brought into the temple as a sacrifice. The sheep gate was the way into God's presence through sacrifice. Every year many sheep would walk through this gate, with their blood to be shed for the sins of the people who built the wall, and lived in and out of the city of Jerusalem.

Years later, in this same city, the sound of sheep could be heard again, at the time of Passover, many more sheep entered the sheep gate, never to leave again. But this time, a sheep would come—not be led into the city, but out of the city—not through this gate but out another, he would be silent as he was hung on a cross to take away the sins of the world. He would be the gate to let sheep into his fold, not to be slaughtered but to be cared for eternally by the great shepherd. I wonder if you have found yourself, thinking of your life, your background, and whether that has preventing you from coming to Jesus? That for this reason, or that reason you feel you aren't a good fit for the Christian community. Or I wonder if you have been coming to church for a long time, and you sometimes feel out of place, like you aren't the same as other Christians.

If you are not a Christian this morning, I want to hold before you, Jesus. Who gathers people from the corners of the earth, regardless of their background, regardless of their skills. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out, and he calls you to leave your past behind and repent and believe. Jesus is the Sheep Gate, the gate for his people to come into God's presence. If anyone enters by believing him, and trusting his sacrifice, they will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture... [and] have life and have it in abundance. (John 10:9-10)

As for us, the church, *this is the gospel we profess*. That it is God that gathers his people together from all nations and all peoples (John 10:16, Matt 24:31), all of us together. And if God gathers us together, he also gives us the ability to abide together. We gather as his redeemed people, gathered by the bonds of the peace that Jesus won on the cross, and united in Christ the head, and the body of Christ is built by the proper working of each individual part. (Ephesians 4:15-16) **(SLIDE)**

Your skills don't qualify you to serve here at Bundy, whether that is reading the bible with someone, making meals, serving on BSF or leading the service.

Friends, it is Christ who qualifies you, and Jesus who brings us together. Calls us to love one another, welcome one another, and bear one another's burdens.

And if we are saved by Jesus who is steadfast in his grace, we can never again be a stranger to him, or to his church.

It was God who gathered the people to build the wall, and continues to gather his people, God who employs them to do his good work of building the church, by our dependence on his son, and our Great Shepherd, Jesus Christ.