

How to build a wall in 52 days

- Nehemiah 3
- Once this title hits the internet, it will be found by Trump's people and downloaded immediately, I'm sure.
- So far we have seen Nehemiah's relationship with God in chapter one. And his relationship with his authority, the king, in the first part of chapter two. And the beginning of his relationship with those whom he would lead, in the second half of chapter 2. Today we drill down into that relationship as we see the ingenious plan that Nehemiah put into place so the wall would be built before the enemies could even mobilize a viable counter-attack. If you read the chapter this week, you know that Nehemiah mobilized the entire community and they worked together with diligence and with enthusiasm. A powerful combination. The Bible says that diligence is a precious possession. And we saw last week that enthusiasm is a work of the Spirit in a person who is "in God," the root meaning of the word enthusiasm. Whenever a group of people come together and work with diligence and enthusiasm, doing God's work according to God's plan, two things are bound to happen. First, God will bless the work. "The plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance." (Prov. 21:5) Second, the enemy will oppose it with all his might. No work of God goes on without opposition. But that's for chapter 4. Let's look today at chapter 3, which at first glance just looks like a boring list of names. But it is much more than that. Let's look at this amazing work with these three main points as our guide: Organization, Participation, and Motivation.
- **Organization**
- It would have been an overwhelming task, by any measurement. As we said last week, the wall was in ruins, and the people were living in the rubble. They had tried to rebuild the wall and had failed, when they were forced to stop work on it. They saw it as hopeless. Too big. Too many enemies. Too hard. Not enough vision. Impossible! But you remember the joke: How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time. How do you write a 10 page paper for your history class? One sentence at a time. How do you build a wall that is 1.5 to 2.5 miles long? One section at a time. And you build your section one foot at a time. If you take the time to count, you will find that Nehemiah divided the work into 40 or 41 sections, starting at the northeast corner of the wall, the Sheep Gate, and working counter-clockwise around the city. This is indicated in the text with transition words like "And next to him" or "After him," (**verse 2**), followed by the name of another group of builders: **the men of Jericho**. Nehemiah had figured how many sections he needed to divide the wall into, and that made the project manageable. Here are some lessons we can learn when it comes to tackling a big job.
- **Estimate how long it will take to finish it with excellence.** Do you want to memorize the book of Titus? It's a big job, but you don't try to do it in one day. That would be overwhelming. No, you estimate how long it will take to commit the 46 verses to memory. If you memorize one verse per day, and factor in a day off every week where you either forget or you just need to rest from it, then you will memorize 6 verses a week. That means it should take you almost 2 months to memorize it. Then you say it every day for 100 days all the way through, and it is there. You've got it in your long term memory and you can recite it once a week almost without thinking about it. But it starts with making a plan to do it.
- **Don't put it off.** I know a lot of Christians would say, "Look, I have been meaning to join the Procrastinator's Club online, but I just keep putting it off." But St. Augustine said, "God has promised forgiveness to your repentance, but He has not promised tomorrow to your procrastination."
- **Do one thing at a time.** After reading several articles over the last 5 years about the myth of multi-tasking, I have banned electronics from my classroom at Elon. We haven't done that at Antioch yet. But the students in my classes have to take notes the old-fashioned way. That forces the student to do one thing at a time: listen to the lecture and interact with it alone by writing

down the important information. When a laptop is introduced into the equation, or a smart phone, I have noticed the student gets dumber. Or at least, he or she is distracted, and so are the people around him or her. I had a student in my class last semester who was a bright girl but could not live five minutes without her phone. I caught her several times with it in her lap, and once during a fellow student's speech, she was busily reading and sending texts. After the speech was over, I walked over to her and held out my hand. She gave me her phone and after class apologized profusely. But her phone and her addiction had kept her from engaging in a fellow student's speech, and had been a distraction to everyone around her. Men, unplug when you get home and give your full attention to your family. Wives, do the same. Remember Peter Drucker's quote from several weeks ago: Effective leaders do first things first and one thing at a time.

- Now, the wall of Jerusalem was being built **one section at a time, but all 41 sections at the same time!** Why was that important? Why didn't Nehemiah just get his best workers, the highly trained construction kings of his day, and have them engineer one section at a time, to its full height, before they moved on to the next section? Because time was of the essence. The enemies of the Jews did not want Jerusalem to be secure again, and they would do anything in their power to stop it. That meant that a whole army of people needed to be involved. That leads us to...
- **Participation**
- If you read the chapter, you know that nearly everybody in the city worked on the wall. This wasn't one of those 80/20 things we have in churches today, where 20 percent of the people do 80 percent of the work. And give 90 percent of the money. No, this wasn't like a football game where there are 50,000 people in the stands who are in desperate need of exercise, while there are 22 guys on the field, in desperate need of rest. No, everybody worked. Well, almost everybody.
- Nehemiah wrote down who was building each section, therefore it stands to reason that he assigned the right people to the right places. He started with priests at the Sheep gate, and what did they do as they started to build it? They consecrated it. They recognized what we must as well, that everything we do is to be done for the glory of God, whether we are cleaning a toilet in our home or brokering a multi-million dollar deal for our company. Priests and Levites are mentioned throughout this chapter, at the beginning, near the end, and in the middle. These guys could have said, "Hey, our job is to pray for YOU while you work." And they might have had an argument, but what were needed most were men and women who would pray *and* work. And Nehemiah put the priests at the Sheep Gate because it was the most vulnerable place in the city for attack, opening up to a plateau, whereas the rest of the wall was protected more by the topography of the land.
- There were men from Jericho (verse 2) there to work. That was 15 miles away. There were other cities named, at least 7 of them. These Jews could have said, "Hey, it's not *my* problem. My city is doing fine." But they took a cue from Nehemiah who had lived in relative comfort in Susa, and had left that to come and work in Jerusalem. It wasn't his problem, either.
- There were skilled craftsmen (verse 8), goldsmiths, working in the rubble. Even perfumers were working, also verse 8. A perfumer slinging mud and hauling heavy rocks?
- Politicians were working alongside the common folk. Verse, 9, Rephaiah was ruler of half the district of Jerusalem. You **know** this guy could have begged off for a golf game, that he might have had scheduled with Shallum, verse 12, who was ruler of the other half, I guess. Notice that Shallum also worked on the wall *with his daughters*. Again, there was a place for everyone in the building project.
- Guards worked on the wall. At least one did. Shecaniah, **verse 29**, was "the keeper of the east Gate." That he means he was part of the security force. Or, he would have been, when there was actually something there to secure.
- Businessmen worked on the wall. **Verse 32**. These guys weren't trying to use this opportunity to make a buck, you know, by selling kosher sandwiches to the workers or iced tea for the hot summer days. No, they put making money aside for the greater good, and picked up a trowel.

- You can see that Nehemiah was able, because the good hand of his God was upon him, to get nearly everybody to buy in to the vision and pick up a trowel or a hammer. I keep saying that Nehemiah was able to get *nearly* everybody to work. The only exception can be found in verse 5. “And next to them the Tekoites repaired, but their nobles would not stoop to serve their Lord.” Interesting. The word for nobles means **wide or large**, so that may have something to do with them not working. No, these guys were rich and powerful, and besides the possibility that they were just arrogant and lazy, some have suggested that they had already sold out to Sanballat and Tobiah, and were backing their campaign to overthrow the work. But what is interesting is that the Tekoites were not slowed down a bit by the fact that their nobles would not lift a finger. In fact, it may have motivated the Tekoites to do even MORE than their share. Look at verse 27. **Repaired another section...**
- Can we apply these same truths to the most important building project that is going on in the world today? What is the most important building project? The church. Jesus said, “I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” (Matthew 16:18) It is a work that requires everyone to participate, in fact that is HOW He is building it. He is fitting us together, as we recited together a few minutes ago: we are to grow up into Him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by **every** joint with which it is equipped, when **each** part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.” (Eph. 4:15-16) The foot can’t say to the eye, I have no need of you. In fact, how would you like to wake up tomorrow and discover that your left foot has left YOU and left you a note that says, “I left!” No! Paul says in 1 Cor. 12, **Now you are the body of Christ, and individually members of it.** Christ is the head, we are His body. And if you just glance at the person next to you or in front of you, will notice something very important. The head is connected to the body. That’s essential. And the body parts, the arms, the legs, the fingers and toes, are all connected to each other! That is also essential. For your body. And for **this** body.
- **Motivation**
- There was genius in the motivation created by the building project. Each group had a goal of building their section until they reached the next group. And they knew the group behind them was building the section to reach them. Some were faster than others, I am sure. That’s just human nature, and part of the fun of competition. You know that’s one of the reasons why I like Pack-a-thons, right? Because I like the challenge of seeing if our station can pack the most meals that night! But I know while we are doing that, the GOAL is the same for all of us: to pack as many meals as we can, collectively, for the glory of Christ. One goal. In the same way, the craftsmen and the merchants and the politicians and the guards and the priests all had one goal: to complete the wall. Even though the Tekoites would clearly be the winners at a Pack-athon. Win by TKO.
- That also meant that no one was sidetracked by selfish goals. What if one group decided as they were working on their section that it needed some windows and window treatments. That they wanted their section to be functional *and* decorative? It would have hindered the work, created strife among the other workers, and possibly caused the project to derail. It happens in churches all the time. The goal is that we all may grow into the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, and that we might play our part as maturing believers in taking the Gospel into all the world. When we take our eyes and our energy off of that, we can get caught up in all kinds of less important goals and projects and programs and forget the purpose for which Christ is building His church.
- One final thing. You notice that several of the groups were building the section of the wall that was right beside their own houses. **Verse 23.** How’s THAT for motivation? Was that just a fluke, or was it by design? Certainly Nehemiah was wise to the fact that if you want people to build quickly and with excellence, you put them building where it will provide the most protection for their own family. And for the families who lived around them and behind them. And ultimately for the family of faith that is represented by everyone in the city. **Prayer**