

## **The People had a Mind to Work**

Call to Worship: Ephesians 4:1-6

Hymn #-

1st Scripture: Nehemiah 3

Hymn #-

2nd Scripture: Nehemiah 4

Hymn #-

### **Introduction:**

After 70 years of living as an exile because of the sins of your people, a gracious king, named Cyrus, comes to power, as the Persians have conquered the Babylonians. You are over 300 miles away from your birth home in Jerusalem, currently living in the land of Babylon. You have begun to settle into this foreign land, and things seem to be looking up, now that Persia is running the show. And then, King Cyrus, gives a decree, allowing any and all Jews who so desire, to return to their own land to rebuild.

As you talk with many of your companions and friends, you find that while some are willing to go back, many are not. After all, what is there to go back to? The land is utterly destroyed. The temple has been completely leveled. The wall of Jerusalem has been torn down and burned with fire. The place has been desolate, abandoned and basically unlivable for the last seventy years. And on top of all of this, there are many foreigners, surrounding the region, who are not too keen on letting the Jews settle back in. And so, to go back, would mean giving up all of the current privileges you have in Babylon (the ancient version of America), only to walk hundreds of miles to a land that must be rebuilt, repopulated and re-cultivated. And all of this, amidst a surrounding people, who are more advanced technologically, far stronger and determined to keep you from succeeding. This is a lengthy, difficult, painstaking project that will take many years to complete, and from the world's standpoint, it is virtually impossible. And even if you do complete the task, many of your years will go into it, and the ultimate fruit of your labors will probably not come about until the next generation arises.

This was the position, which the Jews were in, when Cyrus had issued that decree. And 42,360 (Ezra 2:64; probably the equivalent of one tribe---little more---that had entered the land

with Joshua in former times) had decided to sacrifice all, going back to the Promised Land to rebuild, in that first group of returnees found in Ezra 2. Why would they do this? Why would they enter on a journey that would bring them much hardship, grief, toil, pain and sorrow? Because Jerusalem was part of the Promised Land, which God had given to the Jews. It was the place where God had manifested and would manifest His presence. God was there, and that was what made the trek worth it.

Not without much conflict and trial, under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Jeshua the high priest, the people gradually rebuilt the temple. And while it was nothing even remotely close in splendor and beauty and size to the temple built by Solomon, which had been destroyed, it sufficed to serve as the place of sacrifice and worship, where the living God would meet with His people, once again. And so, the people settled in near Jerusalem, with the temple complete, but Jerusalem was still in ruins, because the wall had been burned down by King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians. All that remained, for the most part, was charred pieces of stone and rubble. It was an absolute mess, and the Jews hardly had the desire or motivation to rebuild it. Add on the fact that they were constantly among the threat of bearing great opposition from foreigners, and you can see why they would have been easily discouraged from going forward with this next, important project. Enter Nehemiah.

Nehemiah was the cup bearer to a new Persian king, King Artaxerxes. He held a high and respectable position, and had obtained favor with the king. But his heart still yearned for the success of the Jews, his kinsman, who were rebuilding, far away in Jerusalem. And when he had received news that the Jews were not doing well; that the people were greatly discouraged and that the wall remained down, he was moved by God to make request of the king, that he could go back to his own land for a time, to help rebuild the wall with his people. And the king graciously granted his request, providing him with the necessary edict that would not only enable him to get to Jerusalem, but also to acquire the necessary building supplies for the project. God provided the supplies with the help of the foreign king. But, needless to say, he, along with his kinsmen, would still have to put their hearts into the work, and that amidst the constant threat of opposition and discouragement, coming from nearby foreigners, led by Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official, who were "deeply disturbed that a man had come to seek the well-being of the children of Israel" (Neh. 2:10).

After surveying the wall, its present condition and the level of repair that was needed, Nehemiah gathered the people together and charged them unto the task of rebuilding the wall, to which they excitedly responded, "Let us rise up and build!" And then, we are told that they "set their hands to this good work" (Neh. 2:18). Naturally, Sanballet and Tobiah mock them, laughing at them and despising them, as they seek to begin what seemed to be an impossible task. And chapter 2, closes with Nehemiah's response to these mockers, "The God of heaven Himself will prosper us; therefore we His servants will arise and build, but you have no heritage or right or memorial in Jerusalem.

And this brings us into our main context, found in chapters 3&4.

### **I. The People had a Mind to Work**

In chapter three, what may seem to be a tedious list of names, is actually a wonderful picture, showing how the people of God had worked together to rebuild the wall. If they were going to succeed, in the face of great opposition and great odds, they had to build the wall together. Can you imagine what it would have been like, if there were only enough people to build one side at a time? They would have been very vulnerable to the attacks of the enemy. But here, we find them all building side by side, beginning with Eliashib the high priest (who with his brethren the priests, rebuilt the sheep gate), and working all the way around the wall, the people built upward together, so that the wall was being formed around the entire city, as one complete unit. And in this way, they worked together and accomplished what could never have been accomplished, had only a minority built one section at a time.

And then, we come to chapter four, where, as we might expect, the opposition comes in to taunt them, and to threaten them if they continue to build. Needless to say, the building efforts would not go smooth. In fact, the more they succeeded, the more difficult it would become, and further measures would have to be taken in order to ensure their safety, unto the completion of the wall. And all of this would be permitted under God's sovereign watch. But following Nehemiah's prayer for help, the people kept building, and the entire wall was built around and joined together up to half its height, because "the people had a mind to work" (vs. 6).

But then, a conspiracy had developed, as the gaps of the wall were beginning to be filled. Under the leadership of Sanballat and Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the Ashdodites planned to attack Jerusalem and to create confusion. And so, the people prayed together and took action, by setting a watch against the enemy day and night (vs. 9).

Nevertheless, the stress; the constant threat of war and the reality of how much more had to be done, began to weigh down upon the Jews. They began to grow discouraged. Listen to the words of verses 10-12 again.

And so, Nehemiah, providing good leadership, takes action in order to provide constant protection, while building the wall at the same time. It took much labor. It took much effort. It took great faith and confidence in God. But they persevered together, ultimately unto the building of the entire wall. Listen again to verses 13-23.

And at the end of chapter 6, we find the wall completed, and the enemies of the people greatly frustrated. This victory was so evident a work of God, that all of the foreigners began to tremble. Listen to the words of chapter 6:15-16. The people had a mind to work, and so they succeeded, as God met their faith with His divine power and grace.

Now brethren, for the remainder of our time, and in keeping with our special "church family month," I want to leave you with several, very practical applications, that can be drawn from all that we have gone over.

## **II. Applications for us**

1) First, brethren, I want you to factor the sovereignty of God into all that we have gone over this morning. Clearly, God was at work here, both in what He did and in what He didn't do. God turned the heart of the king to favor and support Nehemiah and the Jews, didn't He? God also moved the king to enable Nehemiah to obtain key materials needed for the building of the wall. And so, God opened the door and provided the means for the Jews to rebuild.

But notice what God did *not* do. God did not keep the enemies of the Jews from interfering with the work at all, did He? He could have very easily struck their enemies from the

outset or He could have turned their hearts to support them, even as He had done with the heart of the king. God sovereignly ordained to allow the enemies of the Jews to press, mock and threaten them, the whole time. And secondly, God did not do the building of the wall for the Jews. Could not God have sent Persians or foreigners to build the wall for the Jews, while they sat back and watched? God can do all things. He is God! And yet, He determined that they would rebuild from scratch; no, in fact, from less than scratch, because they had to clean up and move much of the charred rubble that still remained from the first wall.

Now, let's understand something very significant regarding the sovereignty of God here, brethren, because this is very applicable to us, as we seek to build this church. I want to suggest to you that much more than the wall of Jerusalem was being built in our text. In fact, in many ways, a far greater building effort was taking place. God was rebuilding the faith of His people. And in order to do this, they themselves had to work, and that, in very difficult conditions, with much opposition. Had everything been handed to them, they would hardly have recovered from their former idolatries, and their experiential faith in the living God would have been quite small. In other words, brethren, God had the opposition right where He wanted them, and He had the chaotic conditions in place, specifically for the purpose of rebuilding His people, as they rebuilt the wall. And by the time they finished the wall, they knew experientially just how powerful and faithful their God was. They experienced the living power of their living God.

And brethren, we must always keep this in mind, as we seek to build this church; as we seek to build up and edify this local body of Christ. It will not be delivered over to us on a platter, while we sit back and watch. Success will only come by means of hard labor, and that in the face of all manner of opposition from within and without. There will be problems; there will be hardships; there will be sorrows and there will be strenuous labor. But all of these are ordained by God, and we must always remember that "all things work together for good to those who love God and are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed into the image of His Son..." (Rom. 8:28-29). As we build, and as we suffer in building, God will be building us, and so, rather than be discouraged or leaning towards giving up, we ought to continue to rest in the sovereignty of God. We ought to, in fact, expect challenges, throw backs and opposition. As Nehemiah and the Israelites succeeded, what happened? The opposition and the hardship grew worse, didn't it? They had to pray and make

adjustments; very uncomfortable adjustments. As we seek to strengthen our personal communion with Christ, and as we seek to turn our eyes continuously outward, looking to the needs of this body, we will face opposition, trial and great difficulty. But, in due time, if we persevere and do not grow weary in doing good, we will prevail...God will bring the increase!

2) The Israelites had to leave the comforts of a well ordered, up to date, technologically advanced Babylon, in order to rebuild in their own broken, barren, charred land. They had to leave the good life behind, in order to dwell in the Land of God's presence and blessing. Leaving Babylon took no small amount of faith, and many stayed because of this.

And brethren, if we want to serve our blessed Savior; if our hearts desire is to love and please the Savior, who embraced a feeding trough at His birth, had no place to rest His head as an adult and willingly had Himself fastened to a cross, so that He could bear our sins, and win glory for us forever...if we want to serve Him, it cannot come without a cross. It cannot come with great sacrifice. It cannot come, apart from turning our backs to this world, so that we might set our interests upon His precious Bride; the apple of His eye, His church. Building the church in any successful sense must and will only come with great sacrifice, on the part of all of us. We will sacrifice comfort, time, finances, energy, commitment, service, entertainment, privileges, desires, conveniences, entitlements, rights and many of the luxuries that surround us in a free country. Building up this body will take sacrifice and commitment...but is it not worth it?

3) Building this church body will take much prayer; but only prayer that is followed up by action. In our text, Nehemiah and the Israelites continually prayed as they faced hardships and opposition and discouragement. They sought the Lord, and in doing so, they set themselves up to receive divine strength and grace...and God met them. But they didn't just pray and sit back! No, they made adjustments; they took steps forward and fought the good fight. When opposition increased, they set up watches at the places where breaches remained in the walls. When it got worse, they worked with one hand on a building tool and the other on their sword. Several never undressed to sleep. They were fully dressed at all times; always on guard. They took shifts, and watched for enemies at every moment. They took action! They took an offensive building posture, and a defensive war posture, at the same time. They rebuilt with sword in hand.

And brethren, we must pray...we must pray...we must pray. Such a short life...so much to do in so little time...how will we use this time. Let us all be spent for Christ! Let us invest in an eternal cause...the cause of our God, Creator and Redeemer! Let us build forward, and let us watch for the enemy. Let us all, every last one of us, stand by the way, not allowing anyone to come through a breach in the wall. Let's work hard to seal the breaches, doctrinally and morally. Let us put away sin...let us strangle it and put it to death. Let us strangle lust and immorality and gossip and selfish ambition and pride and covetousness and etc! Let us hold each other accountable and look out for one another. Let there be not a single soul sleeping by the wall. Do you see how vital your part in this body really is? Don't be the breach; Don't be the enemy's ticket into the camp! Fight the good fight and lay hold of eternal life, brethren! Strengthen and encourage one another. We will all feel overwhelmed at times. We will all struggle with discouragement. We will struggle with growing weary. But if we all work together, then, when one is down, those who are up will be ready to lift him!

4) Let me leave you with a general principle concerning ways that you can serve this local church body. Let me give you a general direction toward which you can exercise whatever gracious gifts God has given you, unto the edification of His church. Indeed, in our example, you find the importance of leadership, who are called to lead and direct the people of God. But you also find two primary means of gift use. There are verbal gifts; gifts of encouragement, teaching, directing, exhorting...etc, unto the end of strengthening the building of the body, and there are service gifts; gifts involving specific and very direct ways of doing the literal building. Now, all are required to encourage/exhort in some respect, and all are required to do physical labor in some respect, but some are more gifted than others in the various tasks involved in the building process.

But, herein lays the overall principle, brethren. Herein, lays the general question that we must all ask ourselves, as we seek to fix our eyes outward unto the building of Christ's church: How can *I* personally be used to build up and edify this church? How can I build up individuals and how can I build up the whole? What can I do to help move this church forward in unity, spiritual growth, outreach, ministry...etc? How am I specifically gifted unto the end of seeing this church prosper? What has God entrusted in and to me, unto the building of His church? Resources, abilities, skills, finances, services, biblical wisdom, technical wisdom, the ability to

recognize and meet needs, biblical discernment, time, experience with suffering, the ability to understand and speak truth...etc? And whatever God has entrusted to me, in what specific ways can I use these gifts and abilities unto the building up of Christ's church? How can I be spent for this beloved body of Christ? How can I invest in the progress of this body? How can I be spent for Christ? Brethren, consider these things; pray fervently about them; come speak to Pastor Doug and I in these regards, and let's work together, every last one of us, side by side, building and strengthening the spiritual life of this church!

5) And lastly, brethren, let us have a mind to work! Let us have the firm and settled conviction that this work is the will of our God and Father, and let us resolve to keep building no matter what...in spite of opposition (inward and outward), in spite of contrary feelings and emotions, in spite of various discouragements and seeming set backs, in spite of personality differences and petty offenses, in spite of everything and anything that the enemy wields at us...let us build, let us be prepared to sacrifice much--to lose our very lives, looking unto a better home whose Maker and Builder is God, trusting that God will give us the victory, and that we already have the ultimate victory in Christ! Christ has conquered, and so shall we, for we are more than conquerors in Him who died for and saved us!

Now brethren, please understand, I am not saying that everyone should just quit their jobs and become missionaries. But I am asking us to examine our priorities, and to see where we as individuals might be emphasizing the wrong things in life. We belong to Christ. He has purchased us unto the glorious end of building His church. This is His priority...should ours be anything less? Let us have the mind to work; the unending resolve to never give up, until we get to glory! Let us rise and build!

Benediction: Ephesians 3:14-21