

Introduction

After they had completed the great task of rebuilding the walls around Jerusalem, Nehemiah, governor of Israel (under the Persians), gathered the people in the square before the Water Gate. There was read, for all to hear, the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had given Israel. It was vital that the people be reminded of why they were there.... purpose, you must have a purpose.... and who they are – their unity as God’s people shaped for godly character. We too have a purpose – God’s purpose. It will demand of us great character and will shape us in godly character. And godly character will be necessary because that great purpose is to be carried out together – as Christ’s body....

Purpose

A little background will help us understand this scene in the square where the law of Moses was read. Perhaps we do not appreciate in our day how important the wall was to the ancient city. Back then, the wall was necessary to protect the city’s inhabitants from enemy attacks. These days we have our infrastructure of police, fire, communications, utilities, and if need be, the National Guard, to protect us. [I can think of one thing (in my experience) that comes close to understanding the value of a city wall – that is the fence around the village of Hunga. All the inhabitants must cooperate to keep the fence around the whole village so that their free-roaming pigs will not get out into the bush where everyone has their plantations. If pigs get out, they root up and destroy the food crops.]

In Nehemiah’s day the wall around the city was necessary for the city’s existence. In this case, they could not be a people without that city and wall. Without the wall the enemies of Israel would walk all over them – that’s why the Babylonians had pulled down the walls in the first place. But with their wall and city rebuilt they could once again seek to be God’s people pursuing God’s purposes. Nehemiah was the cupbearer to Artaxerxes the Persian king – perhaps around 540 b.c. Recall that Jerusalem had been destroyed in 586 b.c. by the Babylonians. At that time the Israelite leaders, craftsmen, scribes, and priests had been taken as captives to Babylon. The Persians, in turn, conquered Babylon. Many of the Jews found work among the Persians, while others were allowed to return to their homeland. Nehemiah served the king of Persia and when he heard how his people struggled back home to rebuild Jerusalem he asked the king to be sent to oversee the rebuilding of Jerusalem. So he was sent as the new governor of Israel and to see that Jerusalem’s walls were rebuilt. Nehemiah set out for Jerusalem with a clear purpose: rebuild the city walls. Don’t we know that if we’re not clear on where we’re going we can end up just about anywhere and it won’t matter. But if we are clear on where we’re headed, we are much more likely to come close to arriving in the right place.

So Nehemiah set out and it all sounds good, except there were those who did not want Nehemiah, or the Jews, to succeed. The tribes surrounding Israel, led by Sanballat and Tobiah, conspired to prevent the walls of Jerusalem from being built. Nehemiah 4-5 describes what happened: Those two enemy leaders came up to Jerusalem and ridiculed those working to rebuild the walls. First they tried to cast doubt in the hearts of Nehemiah and his followers. If you don’t believe a project can succeed then you won’t make the effort to get it done. The enemies of Israel were trying to tear make them doubt themselves and doubt their God – and take away their motivation.

Sanballat said, “What are those feeble Jews doing? ... Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble – burned as they are?” Then Tobiah said, “What they are building – if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones!” But the Jews prayed to God and kept building (Neh. 4:1-5).

When the walls reached half their height, those enemies planned an attack on those who labored on the walls – thinking they could catch them by surprise and kill them. But Nehemiah was informed (by Jews who lived outside the walls of Jerusalem) of the plan and instituted a plan of vigilance. Nehemiah personally saw to the defenses of the city: guards were set at the most vulnerable points and the laborers worked with weapons

in hand, and an attack response plan was set in place. Nehemiah reports, “So we continued the work with half the men holding spears, from the first light of dawn ‘til the stars came out” (Neh. 4:21).

The intrigue of the enemies continued, right up to the time they were about install gates in the completed wall. Sanballat sent Nehemiah a message asking him to come to a meeting and discuss things. His enemy trying to distract him from his purpose and pull him away from his supporters. But Nehemiah replied, “I am carrying on a great project and cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?” (Neh. 6:1-3).

Then Nehemiah faced dissension his own ranks. There was an outcry about injustices; about how some had sacrificed so much while others took advantage of the situation. Nehemiah confronted those who were taking advantage of their fellow Jews. “What you are doing is not right,” he told them, “Shouldn’t you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies?” (Neh. 5:9).

Meanwhile, Sanballat continued to try to intimidate Nehemiah by sending letters accusing him of fomenting revolt against the king of Persia *and* hiring prophets to prophesy against him. That’s always a tough one: when you are on the path to fulfilling God’s call and other religious leaders tell the people that it’s not really God’s call at all. He faced all these challenges and distractions from the purpose and Nehemiah prayed to God, “Now strengthen my hands” (Neh. 6:9c); and the work continued.

During our own day of uncertainty the Enemy is finding opportunity to distract the church from its purpose. Churches across the country are challenged on many fronts. Right here, our new building is almost complete but it comes with debt. We’re looking for our new Youth Director, but that will require added financial support. This new year brings uncertainty in our income, even as we have added expenses. I don’t know about you, but I’m apprehensive. We need to pray, “Lord, now strengthen our hands.”

We can easily be distracted from our purpose by worries or disagreements or problems that arise. In fear we could pull back from preaching the gospel. We can be tempted to shy away from bringing people to that transforming power found in Jesus. The enemy wants to divide us – by color, by race, class, by pocketbook, by program. But we’re not color! We’re not class or race, or pocketbook, or program! We’re Christians.

Notice this now: when at last the big job of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem had been completed and the people had a chance to get settled in their homes, Nehemiah had them all assemble as Ezra – the Scribe – and the priests brought them together to worship God and read them the law of Moses. “So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave them the sense, so the people understood the reading” (Neh. 8:8). That’s just good preaching – explaining the Scriptures in a way that is practical and relevant. They read the foundational documents of their call and purpose as God’s people.

It is so vitally important, especially after completion of an important project, to come back to the main thing. Church’s are easily distracted by the mechanics of mission or a large project. Nehemiah knew this and so reminded them of God’s law and their purpose to live as God’s people. We too are God’s people, gathered here for a great purpose – to serve in the salvation of the nations.

Our new building is one piece of our great purpose; the other pieces have to do with bringing people to the transforming power of Jesus Christ and building up the body of Christ. We put much attention and committed much of our resources to building our new Narthex. Let us do the same as we diligently seek to fulfill our greater purpose to bring people to Christ. Let’s commit our resources to such a worthy project; not forgetting to call upon the generosity of our Lord.

Nehemiah set out for Jerusalem with a clear purpose: rebuild the city walls. In the process of fulfilling that purpose he would fulfill others – feeding the poor, motivating the people to efforts that would ultimately serve them, encouraging them to achieve something they may have thought was beyond them, inspiring the people to seek God’s help, and teaching the people of God’s love for them through it all. Nehemiah’s purpose turned out to be perhaps even greater than he had envisioned. There is no telling what great things we will accomplish when we seek above all to serve God’s purposes.

Character

When you stay true to your purpose God can shape your character. In the process of staying focused on his purpose Nehemiah grew in godly character:

The **courage** he found to ask the Persian king to send him to Jerusalem grew into great courage when his detractors and enemies assailed him. To the false prophets he said, “Should a man like me run away? Or should one like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go!” (Neh. 6:11). And I love what he says to Sanballat who is trying to draw him into a trap, “I am carrying on a great project and cannot come down” (Neh. 6:3).

His **determination** to begin and complete the project became the foundation for a stronger community. When we refuse to let the naysayers tear down our efforts we encourage many others. Nehemiah remained steadfast in purpose inspiring the people to remain steadfast.

His character took a big step forward when his **resourcefulness** was called upon. You know, God often leads us into situations where we must pray for His help, but we must also use our wits and abilities. Because the work on the walls was spread out he had to organize the people for defense. He told them, “Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!” (Neh. 4:20). Often we must make decisions in the midst of the project and struggle over things we had not anticipated. But with God’s help and our own wherewithal we can prevail.

Nehemiah’s **leadership** abilities grew commensurate with his **relationships** with people. Not only was he committed to the project, committed to God, he was committed to them as well. They responded to him because he **shared** their **hardships** and acted with **fairness**. “Neither I nor my brothers nor my men nor the guards with me took off our clothes; each had his weapon, even when he went for water.” (Neh. 4:23). Facing unexpected problems within, Nehemiah responded with **compassion**, making sure the poor were fed and justice was done among the people. He kept them all united regardless of class or circumstances.

Nehemiah showed positive traits of character: **courage, determination, resourcefulness, leadership, relationship building, and compassion**. These are character traits worth emulating. It is always the case that when we choose to stay true to our purpose we will grow in character and integrity. When we commit ourselves to some great purpose we will find that resources then flow to that purpose. If we stay true to our God-given purpose here, with Christ as our head, then I know we will develop Christ-like maturity, and even greater resources will arise among us.

One Body

Nehemiah had the task of rebuilding Jerusalem’s walls with volunteers – those who shared the vision. It could only be accomplished if all the individuals were honored – each one made a difference - yet also gave themselves unselfishly to the work. Unity of purpose and unity in relationships was necessary to the task.

As members of Christ’s body, the church, we’re in pretty much the same position. “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.” (1 Cor. 12:12-13).

The Enemy wants to divide us over our circumstances. But our hope is not in our circumstances. Our hope is in God! The Enemy wants to divide us over the roles we play or positions we have in the church. But our value is not given by those roles or positions; our value is given by God! “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it” (1 Cor. 12:26). Each one makes a difference. We cannot allow ourselves to get distracted by programs, problems, positions, or even disagreements. We must pray and seek solutions so that we can stay true to our calling and fulfill our mission: “To bring people to the transforming power of Jesus Christ through membership in his family and to equip the members for ministry in the church and the world.”

The church is a community of disciples composed of all those who have believed on Jesus for salvation. In our day we have lost that perspective. Often people of the church feel as though discipleship is optional, that perhaps it is only for those who are extremely committed, or else it is for those who have been called to leadership or ministry. We must regain the perspective of Acts: To believe on Jesus draws a person into a

community, a community that defines its expectations, responsibilities, and privileges in terms of discipleship.¹

We are all under one Spirit, and Christ expects us *all* to work together for his good and glory. Our membership class teaches that all the members are ministers. You make a difference!

Conclusion

Purpose, character, and one body – those are the principles we learn from Nehemiah. We have a theme for our church during the year 2010 that is related: “Steadfast, Committed, United. You make the difference.” What that means is that when we remain steadfast to God’s purpose, and committed to God, and committed to one another, then we’ll have the unity that makes the church *be* the body of Christ. Each one of us makes a difference.

Now there’s one more piece to the story of Nehemiah. This is the really cool part. Remember the people gathered in the square to hear Nehemiah, Ezra, and others read them the words of Moses? It says, “...all the people wept when they heard the words of the law.” Why did they weep? Sometimes when we’re reminded who our people were in relation to God, and we really are called to be in God’s plan, we realize how far off the mark we are. Maybe our consciences get to work on us and we become more aware of our own sins and well, it can bring on the tears and remorse. It could also be that those people realized that Moses and their ancestors had gone through much sacrifice and hardship following God to freedom, and they themselves had just gone through as much to come to this day. They had actually participated in God’s purposes and achieved something great, just like those God’s people of long ago. That’s also something that can bring us to tears – not of guilt but of joy. And Nehemiah says to the people, “Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.” (Neh. 8:10).

We’ve come far in this past year, and the road ahead looks like it could be challenging. But I am sure we can go forward because we have a purpose, we are building godly character, and we are one body in Christ.

So even through the struggles and challenges *the joy of the Lord will be our strength.*

¹Michael J. Wilkens, *Following the Master* (Zondervan Publishing House, 1992)