

The king said to me, "Why is your face sad, since you are not sick? This is nothing else but sorrow of heart." Then I was very much afraid. I said to the king, "Let the king live forever! Why shouldn't my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, lies waste, and its gates have been consumed with fire?" Then the king said to me, "What is your request?" So I prayed to the God of heaven. I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you would send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' tombs, that I may build it." Above the horse gate, the priests made repairs, everyone across from his own house. After them, Zadok the son of Immer made repairs across from his own house. After him, Shemaiah the son of Shecaniah, the keeper of the east gate made repairs. After him, Hananiah the son of Shelemiah, and Hanun the sixth son of Zalaph, repaired another portion. After him, Meshullam the son of Berechiah made repairs across from his room. After him, Malchijah, one of the goldsmiths to the house of the temple servants, and of the merchants, made repairs opposite the gate of Hammiphkad, and to the ascent of the corner. Between the ascent of the corner and the sheep gate, the goldsmiths and the merchants made repairs. But when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry, and was very indignant, and mocked the Jews. He spoke before his brothers and the army of Samaria, and said, "What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they fortify themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, since they are burned?" Now Tobiah the Ammonite was by him, and he said, "What they are building, if a fox climbed up it, he would break down their stone wall." "Hear, our God; for we are despised; and turn back their reproach on their own head, give them up for a plunder in a land of captivity; don't cover their iniquity, and don't let their sin be blotted out from before you; for they have insulted the builders." So we built the wall; and all the wall was joined together to half its height: for the people had a mind to work. Therefore I set guards in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, in the open places. I set the people by family groups with their swords, their spears, and their bows. I looked, and rose up, and said to the nobles, to the rulers, and to the rest of the people, "Don't be afraid of them! Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses." When our enemies heard that it was known to us, and God had brought their counsel to nothing, all of us returned to the wall, everyone to his work. From that time forth, half of my servants did the work, and half of them held the spears, the shields, the bows, and the coats of mail; and the rulers were behind all the house of Judah. Those who built the wall, and those who bore burdens loaded themselves; everyone with one of his hands did the work, and with the other held his weapon. Among the builders, everyone wore his sword at his side, and so built. He who sounded the trumpet was by me. I said to the nobles, and to the rulers and to the rest of the people, "The work is great and large, and we are separated on the wall, far from one another. Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally there to us. Our God will fight for us." So we did the work. Half of the people held the spears from the rising of the morning until the stars appeared. Likewise at the same time said I to the people, "Let everyone with his servant lodge within Jerusalem, that in the night they may be a guard to us, and may labor in the day." So neither I, nor my brothers, nor my servants, nor the men of the guard who followed me, none of us took off our clothes. Everyone took his weapon to the water.

There is an old story about three highly trained Corps of Engineers surveyors who were tasked with making early preparations for some sort of power-plant project in South Mississippi. The first task in the project was to drain a swampy area near the river in preparation for building the support buildings and then the project could go from there. They took the blueprints and overlaid them on the topographical maps and they calculated and they schemed and they prepared.

Since the project was basically out in the middle of the swamp, they bought equipment and gear for a three-day stay on their first trip out to the site. They hired a local man to use an air-boat to haul them in with their transits and their gear and their food and a canoe. He dropped them on a little island and they agreed he would meet them at that exact place three days later. So when the man came back in three days later, he found them all three at the top of a scrub oak—still wearing the same clothes they were three days ago—frantically waving their hats at him. When he stopped the boat, they climbed down and quickly jumped into the boat—leaving their still-unpacked gear on the island.

“How did it go?” he asked them. “How did the blueprints and the ideas fit in with the real world—since they had seen it all in person?” “Was it a suitable place after all?” “Did they think that the power-plant would be operational a year from now?” They said they didn't know and that they hadn't even looked through a transit or gotten in the canoe. They hadn't surveyed the land at all. Seems that they forgot.

What they learned is that it is hard to remember that your primary objective is to drain the swamp when you are up to your armpits in alligators.

As a church—as the people of God in this place and in this time—we have lots of objectives—and a lot of jobs to do. ONE of our primary objectives is the continue the ministry of Christ and that in itself generates many different jobs.

Let me ask you—what do you see as the most important objective here on earth and here in this place? [Reaching people for Christ] You might say that it is the same primary objective of the Methodist church across Beaverdam and the Baptist church up the road—in fact, couldn't we say that in some form or another, that objective is why Churches exist?

Churches and Christians have given lots of different excuses over the years for not pursuing that objective—for not accomplishing the work that God has for them. I've heard a lot of them, haven't you?

Here are some: I'm too shy to talk to people about Christ. I don't have any training or education. My job keeps me so busy that I don't have time. We are an old church and we are just getting too old to reach out to people.

Then there are the people themselves—the people all around us are not like people used to be. People, even the ones that didn't go to church, used to care about God—but now they don't care about religion at all.

I'm thankful for the teenagers and the young adults that come to Zion and who are a vital part of our church—but many of our own children are not interested of continuing the work of Christianity even though they were raised to be involved with the life of the church.

Then there are those “other people's kids.” They have short attention spans because of playing so many video games and they are rowdy and they aren't really interested in what we have to offer.

Adult tastes have changed too—people want to be entertained in church. They aren't happy with the old ways, that were “...good for our mothers and good for our fathers..” [...and good enough for me...Gimmie that old time religion...] But we are a little church that doesn't have enough money to keep up with the times and stay on top of latest technology and buy fancy signs and sound systems and all that.

It is hard to get people to teach classes and no one really wants to study the Bible and grow. People only want to follow, they don't want to lead.

And on and on. Not all apply to all churches, but some of it applies to every church. I'm thankful that many of those things don't apply here—but some do.

Those alligators are real.

I really is difficult to win people's attention—and then keep it. The world around us really doesn't seem to care about spiritual things in the traditional sense. They don't even know what they are missing.

Serving God is not always easy and never has been. For the scripture today, I could have chosen any of a number of prophets or time-periods, but I chose Nehemiah for several reasons—and I will probably share some of the reasons along the way.

I read a lot of scripture earlier, but I was trying to set that proverbial stage. Still, I want to give some more background.

God's chosen people had slipped. They had forgotten that God had promised promises to Abraham and that he had brought them out of slavery and back to the promised land. They had forgotten the miracles and the manna.

They had forgotten all that God had done for them and they have turned their backs on him. And God responded by taking away his hand of protection and allowing them to be carried off into slavery again.

They were so sure that it couldn't happen. They had been warned and warned again, but they didn't believe the warnings. When it happened they were devastated. After all, weren't they God's chosen people and wasn't Jerusalem his city and wasn't the temple God's temple? Certainly, they thought, God would protect that which was his.

But God allowed the best of the best—the leaders and the artists and the elite—to be carried off. The temple was turned to rubble and God allowed Jerusalem to be destroyed. Even the walls were knocked down.

In the book of Ezra, there is record of the people being allowed to return and begin to rebuild Jerusalem, but there were lots of problems and troubles.

Some time later, Nehemiah, who was a cup-bearer or wine-steward for king Artaxerxes—learned that the walls had not been rebuilt. Of course, the walls of a city were its security system—without walls, no matter what else had been rebuilt, Jerusalem was not yet a city. Thieves and armies could come and go at will.

Apparently the news hit Nehemiah hard and the king noticed that he was upset. Nehemiah was given permission—and a leave of absence—to go and rebuild the walls.

When he got to Jerusalem, he saw that he had an awesome task before him—but eventually he got it done.

I think that we can look at their rebuilding the wall and maybe overlay their process on the awesome task we face here at Zion—that of reaching our world for Christ.

1. Let's begin at the beginning. Let's be sure that we are serving and doing and being where God has sent us. God promised the land to Abraham and Isaac and he renewed the covenant at the Exodus. God had put them there, even if they had allowed their stubbornness and circumstances to remove them temporarily.

Zion Christian Church was placed here by God and this church has made a stand for God here. We belong here. We have work to do here. That can also be applied to individuals. Is this YOUR Jerusalem? Does God want YOU to take a hand in his work here? If so, take up a section of wall and go to work. Church and people: Work where God put you.

2. Another way to follow Nehemiah's example is to see a need and desire that it be met. When Nehemiah heard that the wall was still un-built, that the work of God was incomplete and the security of his people was at stake—his heart was broken. He saw the need and he began to pray—in fact he reports that he brought it to God over and over and over. Day and night, night and day—begging God to listen and to act.

As God's people in this place, we too are to look for what needs to be done—for the work that God might have for us to do here—and pray for the opportunity to get it done. Nehemiah was in no position to see the wall built, or even help—let alone plan it and build it. His response to his helplessness was not to give up, but to pray. Not only did he pray day and night, he also took the opportunity to share with the king when asked to do so. He shared his concerns and his desire for the wall to be rebuilt. He knew what work was needed and he asked God to intervene. He also did what he could do and God honored his desire and his prayer.

3. Nehemiah followed through. He had seen the need and he had prayed over it and shared his hopes with the king. The king made him governor. See the need, pray over it and suddenly you are in charge of it. Just like Zion Christian Church, huh? Just like every church I ever attended.

Still he took his job—God's job to heart and he followed through. Maybe God has laid something specific on your heart—some particular piece of this church's and God's objective here in Beaverdam. God is ready and willing and waiting to give you the resources and the ability to get it done. Maybe you can't see it yet, but you know Nehemiah could have never imagined his future. He was a WINE STEWARD for goodness sake. He wasn't an engineer. He wasn't a politician. He was just a man who had a heart for God and a heart for God's work. God provided the rest.

One of the first things he did was inspect and organize. He looked over the wall and he made notes and lists. He even made a shopping list for Lowe's [well maybe not]. He got volunteers and he organized and he put them to work. Someone had some responsibility, no matter what their skills or abilities. They all pulled together.

I heard a story about a man who went to China years ago. His hosts showed him here and there—tried to impress him with the Great Wall and many other parts of their country. They shared the best of the best food. When it was time to leave, his hosts asked what impressed him most. Instead of all the other things he had seen, he said that he was most impressed with the small streets—how clean they were from curb to curb and how there were no potholes or cracks or other damage. He wanted to know how they managed to accomplish that. Their reply was that each family was responsible for that part of the street that ran in front of their house, and it was their job to keep it maintained.

In a real sense, this is how Nehemiah got the wall built. In the book of Nehemiah, we see lists of people and families—those people were responsible for building the wall in front of their houses.

Number 4 is participation and responsibility for all. If we are going to do God's work here at Zion, each of us has to take responsibility for some part of that objective. We all have to participate in some way—even if the work is difficult. In fact, we all have to participate **ESPECIALLY** if the tasks are difficult—that makes it even more important.

Number 5 in this pattern is to do what it takes, stay in for the long haul—even if you have to get an extension. Do what it takes. Even if it is harder than you imagined and even if there isn't enough help—and even if there are enemies lurking about.

Number 6 may be the most important of all. Support one another. Look at how they worked on their wall. Look at how they worked—back to back—a swordsman to back up a builder. One working and the other standing with a sword in their hand. A swordsman backing up a mason. Even the builders had a spear handy. They kept rams-horns to blow in case there was an attack—so others could run and help.

Support for each individual—especially those under attack. Good idea huh? I wonder how that concept got lost in the shuffle. That isn't the way the modern church works is it? We are all about letting those who will work do the work—but often we don't support them well—if we support them at all. If the enemy comes near and attacks a worker, do we run and protect them and stand with them?

What we really do is start blaming them and talk about them and then let them fight their own battle without any support—in fact we may even attack them too. And then talk some more. Let me just say right here that in my opinion gossiping and backbiting and talking about our own is probably the biggest and worst-est sin to be found in the modern church—bar none!

If you decide you can't help yourself and are going to talk about someone in the church—if you get the urge and can't help yourself, why not substitute something less harmful. God out and run a red light or speed or get drunk. We think doing those “unholy” things is so bad, but those things probably won't do nearly as much damage as gossiping and backbiting and in-fighting in the church. Or why not just burn down the church—because gossip and infighting will ultimately burn it down from the inside anyway.

Nehemiah teaches us that we are to support each other when we are under attack—and I can tell you that even though we don't all fall all the time, we are all under attack. Why in the world do we shoot our own wounded—especially when it may be me or you next time.

Number 7 is continuing in prayer. We see in verse 4:4 that when things looked bad they went to the LORD and sought his face. Seeking his blessings. Seeking his protection. They were not too proud or too stubborn. Their job seemed almost impossible—so they needed God's help and they sought it out—they asked for it.

Remember the alligators I talked about? The things that stand in the way of a modern church being successful—of winning the battle? Those things are real—those alligators are real. Our job is ALSO impossible on our own. It IS difficult to make Jesus real to modern people. It IS difficult to compete with the media world. We really ARE a small church with limited resources.

Pray.

As time went on in Nehemiah's life and work—as reflected in chapters 4, 5, and 6—we see that Nehemiah had to deal with internal difficulties—mockery, slander, treachery, and compromise. One of the best things Nehemiah did was ignore what he could instead of being sidetracked—and focus on the Job had for him to do. There was gossip about the wall and the work and about Nehemiah, but he didn't take his eyes off that proverbial prize. He kept working.

God will bless us if we follow Nehemiah's example.

They got it done. Did they get it done on time and under budget? Nope. They did not. But they did get it done. (Neh 12:27) IT was rebuilt. God's house was secure.

Is God's work always easy? No. Can it be done? Yes. We have to rely on God and each other and put our backs into it.