

Mending Wall

Robert Frost has a poem called “Mending Wall.” In it, he questions the need to build walls between neighbors. He questions his neighbor’s proverbial wisdom—“Good fences make good neighbors.” If Frost is going to build one, he wants to know what he’s “walling in or walling out.” It’s my favorite Robert Frost poem.

In today’s text, the Israelites are going to begin rebuilding Jerusalem’s walls. We might think Frost would disapprove. I’m not certain he would. In fact, I think he would rather like the results since there’s certainly something dangerous to wall out, and the work of building this wall accomplishes the precise thing which he longs for in his poem. As we’ll see, this fence bridges barriers.

Let’s read part of chapter two and three of Nehemiah in order to see how.

Nehemiah 2:11-3:5

¹¹I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days ¹²I set out during the night with a few others. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on.

¹³By night I went out through the Valley Gate toward the Jackal Well and the Dung Gate, examining the walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken down, and its gates, which had been destroyed by fire. ¹⁴Then I moved on toward the Fountain Gate and the King’s Pool, but there was not enough room for my mount to get through; ¹⁵so I went up the valley by night, examining the wall. Finally, I turned back and reentered through the Valley Gate. ¹⁶The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, because as yet I had said nothing to the Jews or the priests or nobles or officials or any others who would be doing the work.

¹⁷Then I said to them, “You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace.” ¹⁸I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me.

They replied, “Let us start rebuilding.” So they began this good work.

¹⁹ But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. “What is this you are doing?” they asked. “Are you rebelling against the king?”

²⁰ I answered them by saying, “The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it.”

3 Eliashib the high priest and his fellow priests went to work and rebuilt the Sheep Gate. They dedicated it and set its doors in place, building as far as the Tower of the Hundred, which they dedicated, and as far as the Tower of Hananel. ² The men of Jericho built the adjoining section, and Zakkur son of Imri built next to them.

³ The Fish Gate was rebuilt by the sons of Hassenaah. They laid its beams and put its doors and bolts and bars in place. ⁴ Meremoth son of Uriah, the son of Hakkoz, repaired the next section. Next to him Meshullam son of Berekiah, the son of Meshezabel, made repairs, and next to him Zadok son of Baana also made repairs. ⁵ The next section was repaired by the men of Tekoa, but their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors.

As the Israelites begin to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, as these people begin to pursue God’s mission, we can learn a couple of important lessons. (**1st**) We learn that there will be opposition. Whenever we pursue God’s calling in this fallen world, there will be those who stand against us—there will be those who stand against God. (**2nd**) We learn that there will be many who are called. God doesn’t call a select few. He calls all his people to his work.

1. There will be opposition (2:19-20; 3:5).

Do you remember last week? Do you recall the main point from last week? Here it is again—God is sovereign. God reigns. He is over presidents and pandemics. And, he is always working for his glory and your good. Amen. That’s encouraging; isn’t it? Such an important truth to constantly keep before us!

Now, here’s another question. How many of you—after celebrating that truth during worship—went about the rest of your day or week regularly losing

sight of it or doubting it? (E.g. You need to pay more to fix your car than you could sell it for. You didn't get that job you interviewed for. You're consumed by grief for a friend or family member who recently passed away.)

So many things in this fallen world challenge our trust in God's reign!

This isn't anything new. It was the case for Nehemiah and the Israelites also. They faced regular opposition as they pursued God's will. It would have been easy for Nehemiah and the people to imagine that once they had Artaxerxes's permission and support that they were set. It would've been easy for them to imagine they were on easy street when it came to God's calling. But, getting the king to back their plan was only the first hurdle they would face.

Next, there were the foreign peoples living around Jerusalem. Their leadership wasn't enthusiastic about the rebuilding project. Their dissatisfaction is highlighted throughout the narrative like a rising tide.

At the end of last week's passage, for example, we're told:

When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about [Nehemiah's mission], they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites (2:10).

Then, in the middle of today's text, we read this:

But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. "What is this you are doing?" they asked. "Are you rebelling against the king?" (2:19).

And, what we will see next week is that all of this mocking and ridicule turns into a full-fledged plot against Israel and its effort to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. The threat of opposition doesn't simply stay verbal. It turns physical. It turns violent. Israel's enemies plan and plot to attack and fight against this rebuilding effort (4:8). (More about that next week.)

That, however, isn't the only opposition Nehemiah and the people encounter. They also face opponents from within Israel. I read up to verse five of chapter three so that you would hear it. It's a short but significant line.

The next section was repaired by the men of Tekoa, but their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors (3:5).

Apparently there were prominent and influential members of the community who wouldn't help to rebuild the city walls. Did these individuals count themselves as above such common work? Were they in some way under the influence of others? We simply don't know. All we know is that they refused to work.

And, this is a dangerous type of opposition—*maybe the most dangerous type*. Opposition from within can destroy morale. It can distort a group's sense of mission. Disunity can tarnish an organization's testimony. It attacks and erodes the essence of a group's identity—of what brought and knit the people together in the first place. So, this disunity in Israel is super dangerous. It's a serious problem for the Israelites. Satan loves to sow disunity among people.

Last Sunday afternoon, I listened to a brief portion of an interview on NPR.¹ The moderator was speaking with a woman who had recently ended a best-friendship of over 20 years, and the woman had written and published an essay detailing why. In short, it was because she and her best-friend were on opposite sides politically. And, since they couldn't agree in their politics, she eventually decided that the two of them couldn't be friends at all. It was really a heartbreaking story—that a beautiful and intimate friendship was dissolved over politics. And, as I was thinking about it, I thought about our church. I thought about our unity.

Friends, it would be easy to cancel Christian friendships over such differences. But, doing so would be to ignore the gospel. You see, the gospel is all about bridging what divides us. This is why Paul is able to write that:

...in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise (Galatians 3:26-29).

But, let's take it a step further. Let's consider the divide our Lord was willing to cross in order to save us. Think about yourself. Think about the stark differences which divided you from God. Remember how repugnant your sins

¹ You can listen to the whole interview [here](#).

were to the Lord. Don't think of yourself as better than you were. We were all the most undeserving and unattractive creatures in comparison to our Lord. Nevertheless, God loved you. While you were repugnant in your sins, God loved and saved you.

Friends, who are we to preach unforgiveness? Who are we to discard others because they don't vote the way we think they should vote? Praise to the Lord Jesus who did not disregard us in that way! Amen.

Well, let's move to the second and final lesson.

2. There will be many who are called (3:1-32).

Remember how I said last week that Nehemiah isn't a textbook on leadership. Well, right now, we're going to see clearly why that's true. In fact, I want you to see why treating this book like a guide to Christian leadership is actually ironic.

Chapter three isn't the easiest read in the Bible. It's chalked full of hard names to pronounce. It's written in a repetitive fashion. It's subject matter is rather mundane if we're being honest—an ancient building project. When you read through the Bible and reach this chapter (if you're like me), you skim it quickly or skip it completely. *I get it*, you think to yourself, *they built a wall*.

But, who built the wall? That's an important question. Let's meditate upon it. Here are some of the people who built the wall—one right next to another.

- A group of priests rebuilt the Sheep Gate (v. 1).
- Goldsmiths and perfume-makers made repairs to the Broad Wall (v. 8).
- A local alderman along with his daughters put in work (v. 12).
- Another local alderman repaired the Dung Gate (v. 14). Now that's a guy whom I could vote for. Talk about real servant leadership—the *Dung Gate!* That's some dirty work.
- Levites (v. 18), temple servants (v. 26), and common merchants (v. 32) all joined together in the rebuilding effort.

Friends, who's doing ministry? Who's called to serve in the Lord God's work? Who's really leading here? Clearly the people of Israel are—both great and small, both men and women, both blue-collar and white-collar. The people own the calling of God. This is priesthood of all believers kind of stuff. This is a beautiful picture. Don't miss seeing it.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah signal a transition in the biblical storyline. Instead of great hero leaders like Moses and David—who rise and lead the people but when they're gone things begin to go south—Ezra and Nehemiah picture a time when the community of God takes the initiative in following God.

One biblical scholar puts it this way.

*[In these books] we see a shift from leaders to community. The Old Testament specializes in charismatic individuals: Abraham, Moses, Samuel, David, and Daniel are just a handful of examples. Indeed Ezra and Nehemiah are striking characters, but [ultimately] these men are absorbed...into the community. It is the community that accomplishes the task of rebuilding the temple wall of Jerusalem. It is the people who turn to the Lord in corporate allegiance....*²

This is a good word for us. Deacons will come and go. Apprentices will come and go. And pastors will come and go. These leadership positions all have their place but simply as a part of the greater whole in the fellowship of our church community. If we expect our leaders to do the ministry work, if we play at consumer Christianity, then we deny the claim Jesus has on each of us. He calls each of us to play our part. He calls each of us to his work in his body—the church.

How ridiculous and futile would it have been if the people living in Jerusalem agreed that the walls needed to be rebuilt then looked to him to do the work himself?! How absurd would that have been?! It would have been laughable and mockable. The opponents of Israel would really have had something to ridicule.

But, God called his people to this important task. And, the wall was built stone by stone by stone. And, the enemies of God grew more and more concerned.

² Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 186.

Friends, so too with us. So too as we listen and submit to the calling of God. He wants to knit us together. He wants to use us powerfully to do his gospel work. He wants to grow our faith in his providence. Brothers and sisters, you are the body of Christ. You are called and equipped to serve him.

...you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light (1 Peter 2:9).

We're truly a strange group; aren't we? In so many ways, we're a motley crew. That's what I love about the church. In the church, the Lord brings people together who'd never otherwise come together. *Seriously!* Yet, then, he lines us up shoulder to shoulder and empowers us by his Spirit to build his kingdom together. Amen.