

Let Us Arise and Build (Lessons from Nehemiah) The Great Willing Unknowns

Intro: Nehemiah records the inspiring story of how God’s people worked together to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem that had been destroyed by the Babylonians over a 144 years before. Remarkably in 52 days, with the leadership of Nehemiah and the hard and cooperative work of all the people, they cleared the rubble and repaired the walls and restored the gates of the city—a remarkable story.

But that effort was the starting point for a spiritual revival as well. No wall, no matter how strong, could protect a people whose lives were disobedient to the Lord. Therefore it was imperative that God’s people experience spiritual revival. Both Nehemiah and Ezra the priest led them toward this renewal. In our last four lessons we’ve seen the components of that revival: 1) reading the Law; 2) reinstating divinely-commanded worship; 3) confessing sin; and 4) committing to personal holiness.

In some ways, Nehemiah could have ended his work on this high note; but even here the story is not yet complete. One important question lingers: What kind of city would Jerusalem now be? Would it be a mere ghost town restored like a monument to Israel’s glorious past; or would it be a thriving spiritual city filled with people who lived near to God in the present?

Nehemiah’s vision was the latter; and for good reason. What message would be sent to the nations around Israel by the people of Israel if the city of their God remained practically in ruins and a place where nobody wanted to be? How would the Lord be honored by such a city? These ideas hold the key to understanding Nehemiah 11. Here we see Nehemiah:

Implementing the vision of a holy city

Here’s what we could say: Jerusalem had a rebuilt temple to honor the Lord. It had walls to protect its people. But what it now needed was holy inhabitants! Already God’s people were moving toward holiness in the revival they had experienced through reading the Law; but now there is the practical matter of implementing the vision of a holy city by bringing people back into the city.

“Now the leaders of the people lived in Jerusalem. And the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of ten to live in Jerusalem the holy city, while nine out of ten remained in the other towns. And the people blessed all the men who willingly offered to live in Jerusalem.” (Nehemiah 11:1–2, ESV)
Nehemiah’s procedure should be read in light of what he had pointed out earlier in the book.

First Nehemiah had placed two godly men to oversee the city.

“Now when the wall had been built and I had set up the doors, and the gatekeepers, the singers, and the Levites had been

appointed, I gave my brother Hanani and Hananiah the governor of the castle charge over Jerusalem, for he was a more faithful and God-fearing man than many.” (Nehemiah 7:1–2, ESV)

Second Nehemiah had established security procedures to protect the residents already living there.

“And I said to them, “Let not the gates of Jerusalem be opened until the sun is hot. And while they are still standing guard, let them shut and bar the doors. Appoint guards from among the inhabitants of Jerusalem, some at their guard posts and some in front of their own homes.”” (Nehemiah 7:3, ESV)

But a problem still existed which Nehemiah duly notes:

“The city was wide and large, but the people within it were few, and no houses had been rebuilt.” (Nehemiah 7:4, ESV)

The reasons for this were understandable.

It would be far easier to build houses in the suburbs than in the city. In Jerusalem there remained the ruins of houses previously destroyed by the Babylonians. It would have been hard work to clear the rubble and rebuild there.

Typically the city would have been more vulnerable to attack by enemies. Living in the countryside would make people less likely to be a direct target and afford them the ability at least to flee away should an enemy army draw near.

But now, as we just read, Nehemiah implements a plan to restore Jerusalem’s inhabitants and make it the glorious and holy city of God it should be.

Nehemiah had earlier confirmed that there were many people in the area, most of whom were living in their cities outside Jerusalem (7:66).

The selection process was done by lot. In Hebrew thought, the lot was considered not only an impartial way of choosing without favoritism; it was also a method that trusted in God’s overruling providence. The purpose of the lot was to select one tenth of the population to move into the city.

Not all commentators agree with this, but apparently after being chosen, those chosen were not compelled to move, but were given the opportunity to voluntarily make the move, consenting to the impartial lot that had been used. Their consent was itself a great sacrifice.

It would not have been convenient to pull up roots and relocate. It would have been difficult to rebuild in the city with the ruins there.

Consequently their voluntary consent earned them the blessing of the remainder of the people.

The remainder of chapter records the names of a few of the people who made the move; but clearly shows that there were thousands more of what Chuck Swindoll calls “the willing unknowns.” He identifies 5 distinct groups:

- (1) the people who willingly moved into the city;
- (2) the people who worked in the temple;
- (3) the people who worked outside the temple in related areas;
- (4) the people who willingly prayed and led worship; and
- (5) the people who sang in the services for God (Swindoll, Charles R. (1998-10-16). *Hand Me Another Brick* (p. 166). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.)

And so in summary, we can say that Jerusalem, the holy city, was to become a thriving city once more, no longer a reproach because of its desecrated temple, its broken walls, and its sparse population with a discouraged disposition. Instead the Lord was being honored with a rebuilt temple fully equipped with servants to carry on the worship and to keep the grounds. There were godly leaders to lead; there were security officers to protect the inhabitants. But Nehemiah’s vision would have never come into being without the willing unknowns who voluntarily sacrificed to make Jerusalem the great and holy city worthy of the God they sought to honor. And though Nehemiah wisely seeks to honor their sacrifice by identifying some of the clans from which they came, it was impossible for him to name every name.

Lessons for Us

Nehemiah’s record shows us how important it is for God’s people to be involved in accomplishing His purposes. So often the emphasis is upon the person in the limelight—the leader who seeks to organize and inspire action. But once again we see how that Nehemiah as a great leader understood the significance of those people who sacrificed personal preference and convenience to make something important happen. And so today the church is filled with thousands of people who never preach a sermon or teach a class or serve as an elder or deacon (people in the limelight), but do what they can to help the cause of Christ. Here’s what I want you to know:

No great thing can be accomplished without the willing unknowns.

The thousands who responded to the plea to move to Jerusalem were integral to the success of a glorified holy city. And so it is today. God’s work depends upon the willing participation of all God’s people.

“from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love. This I say therefore, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind,” (Ephesians 4:16–17, NASB)

You may not ever be recognized for the contribution you've made; but God knows every sacrifice you make.

I don't know why Paul suggested these principles in his letter to Timothy; but I can certainly appreciate their relevance to our topic today:

"Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, "The Lord knows those who are His," and, "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord abstain from wickedness." (2 Timothy 2:19)

First then know that God knows who His people are! And take courage that nothing you do for God is ever forgotten by Him.

"For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints." (Hebrews 6:10)

To do what is right hoping that it will be discovered and praised is to imbibe the spirit of the Pharisees who acted to be seen of men.

BEWARE of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 6:1)

The Pharisees appear to have deliberately made efforts to let others see their righteous deeds in order to be praised for them. Jesus warned his disciples not to allow this unholy motivation to enter into our righteous acts.

But to do what is right without the prospect of human recognition or praise is to know the real meaning of servant hood.

The human tendency is to seek the position of power and recognition; but Jesus' kingdom is founded upon on his example of humble service. *It is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many. (Matthew 20:26–28)*

A true servant doesn't care who gets the credit as long as the work of God get's done. For that person it is never about them, but about God who deserves all the honor, glory and praise.

God loves and will honor the work of the willing unknowns.

Thousands of people have passed respectfully by one particular tomb in Arlington National Cemetery. It is the honorary grave of the soldier who died in battle, but was never identified. It is the recognition that his sacrifice was just as real and important as that of all the people who names are inscribed with loving honor upon their own personal tombstone. And it bears this significant inscription: "Here rests in honored glory an American soldier known but to God."

If in the secular world we can honor such people; how much more those who work and sacrifice for the advancement of the greatest cause known to humanity—the freedom of men from sin. Here's Paul's assessment of the future of the obedient servant:

“to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life;” (Romans 2:7)

Conclusion: Like the people of Nehemiah’s day, let us build a city that honors the Lord. Let’s fill it with people who seek to glorify the Lord all that they do, who are willing to serve and sacrifice convenience for the good of the Lord’s cause.

One thing is for sure: it will not happen without the participation of the willing unknowns!