

EZRA-NEHEMIAH, part 11

by Dr. Ralph Davis

Blessed Builders (Nehemiah 3)

You will find it very helpful to have at hand a reconstructive sketch of Nehemiah's Jerusalem as you read this chapter.¹ The description will start from the NE corner and work its way counter-clockwise. The operative verb in the description is "make repairs" (the hiphil of *chazaq*, lit., "make strong"). It likely refers to restorative work, not necessarily to work from scratch (or, if you detest colloquialisms, work *de novo*.)

These notes do not feature a full-blooded exposition of this chapter, but the following brief observations should be useful:

I. The Leadership of Example – Nehemiah 3:1

The high priest and priests were first out of the starting block. They apparently did not have the idea that such work was for "peons." Rather, those with sacred office took the lead in the restoring work.

II. The Presence and Problem of Arrogance – Nehemiah 3:5

The verse is puzzling, but it seems that there were some from the town of Tekoa, the "nobles," who refused to assist in the work. Did they think it was beneath them? By contrast, however, the chapter is littered with others who had social and political clout who avidly contributed their share to the work (see Neh. 3:9,12,15,19).

III. The Motive of Personal Interest – Nehemiah 3:23,28-30

What do you make of those who carried out repairs "in front of their house"? Well, what's wrong with it? They would likely perform quality repairs if it were part of the defense near their own home. In 1948, when the Jewish sector of Jerusalem was being slowly strangled by an Arab cordon, there was yet time to get the women and children to the coast and away from besieged Jerusalem. Dov Joseph, a Canadian lawyer in charge of provisioning Jewish Jerusalem, refused to allow the evacuation. He reasoned that Jewish men would fight far hard to defend their sector of Jerusalem if they knew the lives of their wives and children depended on their bravery. They wouldn't need to

¹ I previously suggested one like that in ZPEB, 2:473. I also recommend the one in Kidner's TOTC volume (p. 85).

be told what would happen to their families if the Arabs overran their positions. Personal interest can be quite a motivator.

IV. The Energy of Zeal

There are some who seem marked by special zeal for the work. Shallum's *daughters* (Neh. 3:12) even helped him in his section of repair. Maybe Shallum didn't have sons, but no matter; his girls could do construction.

Meremoth the son of Uriah apparently repaired *two* sections (Neh. 3:4,21), as did the men of Tekoa (Neh. 3:5,27), even though the latter did have some malcontents (Neh. 3:5b). This taking on more than one's share speaks well for these workers. Happily, such a breed of the Lord's servants never seems to be totally extinct!

V. The Achievement of Non-Professionals

Yamauchi cites the experience and testimony of Viggo Olsen, who helped rebuild ten thousand houses in war-ravaged Bangladesh in 1972.² Olsen derived unexpected inspiration from reading Nehemiah 3, admittedly not one of the more moving passages of Scripture. However, Olsen said, "I was struck ... that no expert builders were listed in the 'Holy Land brigade.' There were priests, priests' helpers, goldsmiths, perfume makers, and women, but no expert builders or carpenters were named." Is this not a healthy reminder in a day when the church is so a-gawk over competence and professional skills?

VI. The Smile of Heaven

True, we cannot follow the turf exactly at every point. We cannot precisely locate every place mentioned. True, we cannot find Nehemiah 3 as lively and stirring as some narratives of the Old Testament. Still, the names here constitute a *roll of honor* of Yahweh's workers, recorded for lasting — and coming — remembrance. And this is typical scriptural and divine practice, for Matthew 10:42 tells us that Christ sees and remembers all puny acts of love and devotion offered to and for him (cf. Mark 14:9; Heb. 6:10).

² *EBC*, 4:701.