Today we are studying the third chapter of the book of Nehemiah. Do you remember I invited you to read a chapter a week with me? I hope you read this one already so you can make the most of it today.

If you missed the last two Sundays, two weeks ago, we started a sermon series from the Book of Nehemiah called “Amazing Things Can Happen.” First, we learned “Amazing Things Can Happen When We Pray.” Then, from chapter two, “Amazing Things Can Happen When We Plan.” Today’s theme is “Amazing Things Can Happen When We Work Together.”

Here is a quick recap of the context of the book of Nehemiah.

We explained that the historical context of this story happened in the 5th century B.C. About 100 years before, the Babylonians conquered and destroyed Jerusalem. The walls and the city were left in rubbles, the Temple was sacked and burned, and many people were taken as slaves. However, some were allowed to return over the years, but only to discover the city was still destroyed and deserted—a terrible reality of sadness, loss, and anger.

Nehemiah had never been to Jerusalem, but when he heard reports of its condition, he requested the Persian king -whom he was serving as cupbearer- to allow him to go back to the city of his ancestors to rebuild it. He prayed for months and put together a plan, so when he made his request, he was ready to go.

When he arrived at Jerusalem, he first surveyed the land, and then met with the people there. This is how chapter 2: 17-18 describes what Nehemiah said to them,

Then I said to them, “You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace.” I told them that the hand of my God had been gracious upon me, and also the words that the king had spoken to me. Then they said, “Let us start building!” So they committed themselves to the common good.

Soon after this speech and the people’s declaration of commitment to rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem, everyone got to work—well, mostly everyone.

That is where we pick up today and how chapter 3 describes what happened next,

Then the high priest Eliashib set to work with his fellow priests and rebuilt the Sheep Gate. They consecrated it and set up its doors; they consecrated it as far as the Tower of the Hundred and as far as the Tower of Hananel. And the men of Jericho built next to him. And next to them Zaccur son of Imri built. The sons of Hassenaah built the Fish Gate; they laid its beams and set up its doors, its bolts, and its bars. Next to them Meremoth son of Uriah son of Hakkoz made repairs. Next to them Meshullam son of Berechiah son of Meshezabel made repairs. Next to them Zadok son of Baana made repairs. Next to them the Tekoites made repairs; but their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work of their Lord.

This chapter starts with the consecration of the work and, immediately after that, getting to work. If you keep reading the whole chapter, it is repetitive in telling us how people were working—just like in these first five verses.

At first glance, Nehemiah chapter 3 looks a bit boring, like a long list of names hard to pronounce and genealogies. But if you look closer, this is a beautiful description of people working together to accomplish so much more than by doing it alone.

Notice that the recurring key phrases through this chapter are “Next to them” and “After them.” These expressions are recorded 28 times just in this chapter. And that is because people were next to each other, like a human chain, working together, and they were everywhere.

For example, they worked near the Sheep Gate (1-2), the Fish Gate (3-5), the Old Gate (6-12), the Valley Gate (13), the Waste Gate (14), the Fountain Gate (15-25), the Water Gate (26-27), the Horse Gate (28-30), the “you name it” Gate. They were synchronized, working together, next and after each other.

Now, how beautiful is that! This teaches us that amazing things happen when we find our purpose, join others and allow others to join us, and work together to accomplish God’s plans.

Therefore, this is not a boring chapter at all. Instead, it paints us an inspiring picture of what can be accomplished by coming together. Here, we see priests, neighbors, friends, and families joining the work with joy because they were inspired to serve God. Look at verse 12, “Next to him Shallum son of Hallohesh, ruler of half the district of Jerusalem, made repairs, he and his daughters.” Everyone was working.

This kind of attitude and behavior towards each other pleases God. It is just like when we see children collaborating, helping each other, and even having fun working together. It puts a smile on our faces because we know it is good for them. It makes us happy to know our kids are not only kind but helpful to others too. In the same way, when God sees us working together with one heart and mind, it is an exciting sight!

Nevertheless, there are always those who don’t want to get involved, and even they only find purpose by getting in the way and discouraging others. Those were the nobles of Tekoa (Tekoites), who refused to participate and help. They are described as “[They] would not put their shoulders to the work of their Lord.”

Most people were diligently working to rebuild their homes and city, but not their nobles. Why? Why did they not “put their shoulders” next to others to accomplish this great and honorable task?

The phrase “putting their shoulders to the work” literally means in Hebrew that they would not submit as in “bending their necks” to what God wanted them to do. The real issue was pride. Maybe they thought they were too good to get their hands dirty or that they had a better plan than Nehemiah did, so if it was not their plan, they would not support it and help.

Whatever their reason, what a shame to be remembered as the only people mentioned in this chapter who did not join in the work. On the other hand, what a great legacy for those that had their families rebuilding the city in which they lived many years after. (Building with others is so rewarding not only for the present joy but also for the legacy that proceeds us.)

I know you know what I am talking about since this church has been involved in many projects like Habitat for Humanity, Amigos Days, building this worship space, the New World Day School, and so on.

Now, think beyond brick and mortar and about blood and flesh, meaning building people up. Most of the time we may not be called to build and repair actual walls, but we are always called to build, strengthen, and encourage each other up. That is the will of God; that is what brings glory to God. And we do that by teaching the wisdom and teachings of Jesus—making disciples.

So, let me ask you: When you look around at your life, family, and everyone else’s, do you think we need help rebuilding and repairing ourselves? Do we need encouragement, inspiration, guidance, emotional and spiritual support? Well, that is the work we are called to do because making disciples is not about a one-time confession of faith but a life-long journey to healing the heart and soul.

This is so important to keep in mind. We are not called to be spectators but workers. Nehemiah is teaching us that we are called to be builders and repairers whenever is needed. Just as they would not allow any longer for their homes to be in rubbles, we too can’t allow our lives and the lives of others to remain broken and defeated. We are not quitters or “nobles” unwilling to get involved in God’s work. Instead, we are here to help make things better by working and serving “next to each other,” “shoulder to shoulder.”

I finish with this.

God wants to bless you and your family and the people you know. Working for God’s glory means making things better for everyone, putting aside pride, jealousy, envy, selfishness, and all the sort of things that cause negativity and division instead of a positive outlook for the future. If we are more concerned about what color we are painting the walls than rebuilding them, we are not focusing on what matters.

My friends, we don’t have time to waste. We need to leverage every resource and word of encouragement to see our church, our families, and the people around us be successful and do well, and we need to be all in.

So, let’s make it happen.