

SAFEGUARDING LIFE WITHIN RECONSTRUCTED WALLS

Nehemiah 7:1–3

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Nehemiah 7—I got stuck on the first three verses. I'd hoped to complete the Book of Nehemiah before we left on vacation. It was tempting to take Nehemiah 7 and 8 today and I got so lost in the first three verses of chapter 7 that I think we'll continue Nehemiah for a couple weeks into September. I now realize that it's taken me longer to preach through the first six chapters of Nehemiah than it took Nehemiah to actually build the wall.

“After the wall had been rebuilt and I had set the doors in place, the gatekeepers and the singers and the Levites were appointed. I put in charge of Jerusalem my brother—Hanani, along with Hananiah the commander of the citadel, because he was a man of integrity and feared God more than most men do. I said to them, ‘The gates of Jerusalem are not to be opened until the sun is hot. While the gatekeepers are still on duty, have them shut the doors and bar them. Also appoint residents of Jerusalem as guards, some at their posts and some near their own houses’”

(Nehemiah 7:1–3, NIV).

The first six chapters of the book of Nehemiah have dealt with the reconstruction of the walls. Chapters 7–13, the last seven chapters of the book, deal not with reconstruction but with re-instruction of God's people. Another way to divide the book between chapter 6 and chapter 7 is to say that the first six chapters deal with the construction of the walls and the last seven chapters deal with the consolidation of the people within the walls.

Any movement of God, whether it affects a corporate body such as us or whether it affects us as individuals, involves really a two-dimensional work. The walls go up in our life and then there's

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a consolidation of the work and the growth within. Otherwise the walls will fall back into disrepair.

In these verses that I have read this morning, Nehemiah, once the walls are up, begins the work of consolidation by making five appointments. He appoints gatekeepers, singers, Levites, commanders, and guards. I would like to be a bit allegorical if you would allow me and suggest that there is a pattern in these three verses that describes what the Holy Spirit seeks to do with our lives as we increasingly model them after the Lord, that when we have come to the Lord in salvation as we've seen, the Lord can do a work of restoration in our life. But there are then some appointments that then need to be made to insure that life within the wall, within the heart, is maintained at the level that God wants it. He doesn't want the city of Jerusalem in Nehemiah's day to go back in its previous state of being broken down. And He doesn't want us either to return to that previous state from which we came. I think these five appointments beautifully suggest the appointments that God wants continually in our life as the work of grace is consolidated in our hearts.

I. The first appointment that Nehemiah makes and the one I'll spend the most time with is the appointment of a gatekeeper.

Basically a gate in the Old Testament served two functions. It served as a place of passage. It's how you got in and out of the city. The gate is the most vulnerable part of the city. It's why the battering rams were used when a siege took place against a city. If the gate could be knocked down the city could be entered. They wouldn't try so much to knock down the wall. They'd try to climb over the wall, but if possible, batter down the gate, the most vulnerable part. What you let into the city is going to determine the life and the quality of life and existence within the city.

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Not only in the Scripture did the gate serve as a place of passage but also throughout the Old Testament it served as a place of the seat of authority. In Old Testament times the place where the city fathers functioned was at the city gate. There are numerous occasions represented in the Old Testament of this. The city gates served as the place where the business of commerce and transactions of law took place, the place where judges sat and city councilmen sat.

In Genesis 19:1, Lot is sitting in the gateway of the city when the angels come. That would suggest that he had arisen to a place of prominence in the city. He was in the gate.

In 2 Samuel, Absalom, when he wanted to dethrone David, would get up early and stand up by the side of the road leading to the city gate where the governmental functions were taking place.

In Ruth 4:1 when Boaz wanted to claim his right of near kinsman to Ruth he went to the town gate and sat there. And the transaction was accomplished.

In 1 Kings 22:10 when the king of Israel and the king of Judah met, the text of Scripture says that dressed in their royal robes the kings were sitting on their thrones by the threshing floor by the entrance of the gate of Samaria.

Amos cries out against injustice at the gate. Many other such illustrations could be used from the Old Testament.

But suffice it to say, linking these two purposes of the gate together, in the event that there is not a controlled access to be city there is never going to be an ability of the city fathers to sit at the gate. For if the access is not controlled then life in the city will become a place of total turmoil and it will not be possible for the governmental agencies to function. There will be no authority unless there is control in terms of passage.

The implications on the spiritual life on this are enormous. What we let into our life very much affects our authority as a believer. If you want to begin to lose confidence as a believer, lose

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confidence in prayer, lose confidence in God, and lose confidence in yourself, then simply let anything that comes along come trafficking into your life. And the seat of authority cannot function.

Therefore the Old Testament gatekeeper was an important personage because it was his responsibility to control the passage ultimately so the government or the authority can function. I would suggest that's an important spiritual representation from the Old Testament. If we think of our lives as a reconstructed city—which is a point I've attempted to make throughout the Book of Nehemiah—then to deduce the principle that God wants to appoint ourselves as gatekeeper within the city walls is not far-fetched at all. It's very real. In the New Testament we see continually how the apostles were concerned about protecting the entrance into the people of God so that not just anybody that wanted to wreak havoc within the body of Christ would be allowed in to do it. Paul, when he has finished his three-year ministry at Ephesus and the most phenomenal ministry in his life had just passed by, gives warning to the elders, the pastors of the church at Ephesus, when he is bidding them a final farewell and he tells them that there are dogs and wolves that want to come in and prey on the flock of God. In effect he tells them to be gatekeepers and not allow that to happen. Paul had had enough experience in guarding the gate against the legalists of his day who wanted to come in and destroy the doctrine of grace. He had had enough experience with keeping the libertarians out. That was the group that said, "Sin all you please in order that grace may abound." Paul wanted to keep those people out of the body as well because of the corrosive influence that they would have wreaked. He wanted to keep the Gnostics out of the body. These were the people who claimed some super-secret knowledge, some super spirituality of the Christian life not known to the "peons" of Christianity—those who

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had only the revelation of the apostles and not this “inner knowledge”!. He was continually guarding against those kinds of things.

I would submit that if the apostle was concerned to guard the gates of the church there is a concern that I have as a pastor, there’s a concern that we have as individuals in regard to guarding what comes into our life. How do we know what to allow and what *not* to allow into our life? There are some issues that are perhaps not all that clear-cut as to what we should or should not let enter into the gates.

Sometimes Scripture does not say you cannot let “this” into your life. But maybe the principle is involved. And the principle is saying you cannot let this into your life. And explicitly or implicitly you can’t let it into your life—it’s going to create some division within the body.

When we look at things that affect us in terms of keeping the gates of our own life, there are those in our day who want to wear the name of “Christian” who would advocate letting all forms of immorality into your life. We simply say that to let immorality into your life is to completely negate the seat of authority in your life. It’s to destroy that authority. It’s contrary to the Scriptures and we must take our stand as gatekeeper and know that God in His wisdom in making us as human beings knew what was best and knew the guidelines that would help us live successfully.

There are some issues that are perhaps not all that clear-cut as to what we should or should not let enter into the gates.

In terms of the emphasis of faith and prosperity I have basically two responses. First, a response that praises God for the fact that there is restoration going on to the tired and pessimistic body of Christ. This emphasis is saying to people who go around pessimistic and downtrodden and fearful all the time, “Take your stand with God. Believe, trust, have faith.” That I can completely

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agree with. There are many believers that run around totally defeated in their life, not taking their stand upon the Word. Often what happens when there is an underbalance in the church, is that the Holy Spirit will allow an overbalance to get people off the deadness which they have come into. I think the movement of faith and prosperity has in effect done this.

Second, I think there has been some overbalance. In effect I see the movement of faith and healing as kind of a camel who wants to come through the city gate. Maybe there's a couple parts of baggage the camel is carrying I'd like to see left outside the city gate and let the rest in because there's so much good that's there that the Holy Spirit wants us to do.

The things I cannot let in the gate in terms of my own emphasis is I cannot let in the gate the view that I am sick or I am poor because I accepted it. While it is true in many cases that people are sick and not prospering because they have accepted it and have not trusted God, it's certainly not true that in every situation a person is sick or a person is poor because they have accepted it.

In fact, if I understand the illustration correctly, one illustration that has been used is that sickness is like rattlesnakes. Some salesman comes along and has a bag of rattlesnakes and says, "Here, if you open the door and let those rattlesnakes in then you're got what's coming to you. You're the one that let them in." In other words, if you let sickness into your life you can either reject it or you can accept it. Again, there are times when that is true. There are times when I've been sick and I've said, Oh, no you don't. I'm going to get up. I don't have time to get sick. And the Lord has healed me on my way.

But to say as a universal principle that every sickness is the result of someone's accepting it is to ignore clear scriptural teaching; for example, the apostle Paul said to the Galatians, "You know it was because of bodily illness I preached the gospel to you" (Galatians 4:13). Why does he say

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that? Because somehow in the sovereignty and will of God he was sick in order that his travel plans could be altered and the gospel could be brought to the Galatians.

I think in helping a person who is sick and suffering, to incite them to faith and encourage them to faith ought always to be done. But it's wrong to turn faith around so that it becomes a blanket of discouragement and say, "In every case you must accept the fact you wanted it or willed it or sinned in some way as to create havoc." This mistaken attitude certainly effects the believer's standing and authority with the Lord.

Also, not every case where the person remains ill can be attributed to a lack of faith. It's not necessarily the case. Sometimes there's great faith and yet here is not healing. Some things we have to leave with God.

But I say welcome to every approach which builds upon solid faith rather than upon fear. Instead of being dead and accepting things as they are, extract from the doctrine of faith and prosperity all that is valid and in tune with scriptural teaching. What in that doctrine is overbalanced that we need to reject and correct?

I think that's involved in gate keeping. I'm a lot harsher toward the shepherding movement. I see it as a diabolical plan to infiltrate the body of Christ and wreak havoc untold in the body. The shepherding plan basically is saying you get in a small group and let somebody disciple you and take complete responsibility for your life and you report to them. And you tell them what's going on. And you accept their judgment in every area. It's a whole hierarchical chain of command. It has infiltrated charismatic ranks. My response to that is simply the response of Jesus when He taught, "Don't call anyone master. Don't call anyone rabbi, don't call anyone father. And don't call anyone lord. You have one lord, you have one master. You have one teacher, you have one rabbi" (see Mathew 23:8–10). Do not get caught in this locked in position of regarding some

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man or woman as your authority. Rather, Paul says in Ephesians 4:11–12, that God has put apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers in the body to the perfecting of the saints. It's a plurality of ministry, not a singular ministry. It's prophet, apostle, evangelist, pastor, teacher. Not *a* pastor, not *a* shepherd, but plural. And call not man rabbi. Call no man master. I would as soon leave that whole group right outside the city gates.

That movement has arisen because there's been improper balance in some areas where we have not returned to a scriptural definition of what it means to really have koinonia together and fellowship together as the body of Christ.

Often heretical movements are overbalanced movements that arise because there's a doctrine that's been neglected.

Gate keeping. Some areas are areas in terms of gate keeping where we really have to walk in the Spirit and we may not exactly know how to respond until that moment comes along.

Some areas of keeping the gate are not all that easy to read. But I think we have to be open both to the Scripture and to the Spirit of God recognizing that the Scripture and the Spirit of God do not work at cross-purposes. But sometimes the Spirit leads in an area where there may be, from the Scripture, some possibility for looking at the dynamic of what may emerge.

I think on a personal level in terms of gate keeping we go back to Nehemiah. Who is it that they're trying to keep out of the gate of the city? They're trying to keep out the Tobiahs and the Sanballats. The Tobiahs and the Sanballats were the negative people who did not believe that God could do a work. We have got to continually keep a post at the gateway of our life to bar those persons and those influences which would attempt to pick us off and make us believe that we are not worthy of Christ, not worthy of salvation, not worthy to be used by God. We must

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keep those people on the outside and force them to stay there. We must keep the values of the world on the outside.

This may involve altering our television watching and reading habits; it may involve altering a lot of what we're taking in. But on a personal level to have the authority in our life, some gates have to be guarded. It's a lot easier to keep things out than it is to keep track of them once they get in.

One final thing on the gate. In the scriptures when Samson came to Gaza, the Philistine city in Judges 16, he was doing what he ought not to have been doing. The Spirit of God came upon him in the night and he took the city gates and carried them out to the mountain. It was such an insult to the city. Their whole ability to defend themselves was gone. When the elders, the city council, come out the next morning, they look and they say, "He took the city counsel chambers?" Tremendous insult. It's like stripping the city naked to take its gates.

I think Samson is sort of a prototype of what Jesus did to death and Satan. Because Jesus says "I'll build My church and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). He stripped death of its power when He destroyed its gates. He let anyone have access and authority over death who would follow Him.

The power of access brings the power of authority. Jesus has given us the power of access over the enemy.

I covered one point and should be closing. Let me quickly look at the others. I didn't think I'd take that much time on gatekeepers.

II. Singers. What a tremendous appointment after gatekeepers.

Singers. No earthly good except to sing. You can see the important function of gatekeepers. But singers? What purpose do they have?

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They have the purpose of uplifting our spirit. You can guard the gate all you want to, but it can be pretty dead out there guarding the gate. Somewhere there's got to be a lift in our heart. In Nehemiah 12 we read further of the singers that there hadn't been the appointment of singers since the day of David. It had been a period of about six hundred years that singing had lapsed and not had its form that it had at its height during the days of David. Singing is either one of two things in our life. Singing or the lack of it may be a thermometer of our Christian experience. If it's a thermometer it's simply reporting what's there. If there is no singing at all in our spirit, praise is something He wants welling up within our hearts, to say, "I love you" and *sing*, "I love you." When you sing it you've got to force something else out of your experience that has to be forced out when you verbalize it. Something of yourself has got to be disclosed. Singing draws into your spirit. It forces something of you out. This is why marks of revival are always marked by great singing. The Spirit of God comes with a song.

I would suggest if there is no singing and worship and praise coming up within your heart that it doesn't have to stay that way. What you can do with singing is make it a thermostat rather than a thermometer of your Christian life. A thermostat is something on the wall that when you want the temperature a desired degree you turn it and it forces the temperature to either come up or come down to that degree that you want. Singing has that kind of pull on our personality. As we begin to sing it opens up a river of cleansing in our heart that actually brings with it joy.

If you seek to be free of depression, I think there's a definite linkage to the wholeness and the health within that is associated with lifting song and praise in music to God.

In a restored city there is singing.

III. There are Levites as well.

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Levites in the Old Testament basically were people who were associated with the work of the priests. Some of them were priests. Basically their ministry was a support ministry. They ministered some by speaking and they ministered most often by serving. In Nehemiah 8:7, they minister by speaking. They minister by explaining the word of the Law to the people as it's read. Most often they minister by serving, Nehemiah 11:15–18. Peter says that there are these two kinds of gifts in ministry. If our gift is a speaking gift we are to speak as oracles of God. If our gift is a serving gift we are to serve with all of our heart and minister as unto Christ.

A restored city is a city in which there is ministry going forth. A restored life is a life that is no longer looking for what spiritual blessing I can receive but is looking for the spiritual blessing I may give.

For hospitality, for love extended, for the joy that is passed on to someone else, for the practical acts of love that I may render—all of these are Levitical kinds of ministry in our life. A restored city has ministers.

The New Testament church is meant to be an every-believer-ministry kind of church. All of us are ministers of Jesus Christ. That is our first calling. Vocations are simply secondary.

IV. A restored city has commanders.

Commanders are those who maintain discipline within the restored city, within the walls.

Circumstances come at us in life. They're either going to control us or we're going to control them with Christ's help. Paul says from jail, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). That suggests to me He's got the commanding influence present in Paul's life.

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If there's anything Paul can't do at that moment in his life, he can't do many things at all. He's in prison. What can Paul do in prison? Instead, he has command of the situation in Christ and says "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

There are moments when we really need to get control in the Spirit of what's going on with us.

V. Then Nehemiah appoints guards.

Guards were stationed at various places throughout the city. They were also near their own homes. If there's anywhere the enemy likes to sneak in it's our own homes. He can't get through the gate. That's the public place of access. So he'll try a sneak attack. That's what guards are for. The gatekeepers control the attack that can be visible.

But the sneaky guys are the ones who come over the walls. And you've got to have someone to protect from them.

There are times when sneak attacks do occur on us in our Christian walk. In our Christian walk there are going to be things that come along. Maybe not extreme, maybe more extreme. But through an accidental collision of events or circumstances it just seems like we're flooded and can't handle it any more. That's why the Lord says "I want a guard in your life to watch out for those sneak attacks that come on you."

What way has the Lord spoken to us today? In the area of gate keeping, singing, ministering, commanding, guarding. All these are areas of appointments He wants to place in our city and the restored life that He has given to us.

There are times when Nehemiah was building the wall and it didn't look like he'd be able to get it done. There were times after the wall was built it looked like life in the city would come unglued. I'd suggest in our Christian experience and our work for the Lord that the very same

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thing appeared. We must remember the Scripture that tells us in Christ we're already seated in heavenly places. We already know the outcome from the beginning.

There are moments when we may be behind. But we always know who comes up last. We always know who has the victory. We always know because of the cross and resurrection we're going to prevail. The Lord wants us to have the assurance right from the beginning of our walk that He is with us and will bring us through.