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TOGETHER WE WIN

Nehemiah 2 & 3

By

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Special Message

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A toddler asked his mother and grandmother to play with him in his new sandbox in the front yard. He equipped each of them with a shovel and pail, which they promptly put to use at his request. The mother and grandmother became involved in conversation as they absentmindedly continued shoveling sand into their buckets and dumping them out again. Suddenly they became aware that people passing by on the street were looking at them rather strangely. It was only then that they realized that the toddler had gone around back to play, leaving the two women alone, playing in the sandbox. (Adapted from *Reader's Digest* [9/86], p. 25.)

It's easy in the local church to get caught up in activities and forget your original purpose. If you're not careful, what began as a good thing with a well-defined purpose drifts into something that looks almost as ridiculous as two grown women playing in the sandbox. And so it's good, from time to time, to review the overall purpose of the church and to evaluate all our activities and efforts in light of that purpose.

In broad terms, the overall purpose for every believer and for the church corporately is to glorify God or, in street language, to make God look good as He really is. We are to show others by our lives--our attitudes, words, and deeds--how great God truly is. That overall goal is accomplished as we seek to fulfill, both individually and corporately, the Great Commandment--to love God with our total person, and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves (Matt. 22:37-39); and, the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20), which is really just an extension of the second greatest command--if we love other people, we will do all we can to bring them the good news that Christ died for their sins and to bring them into submission to Him.

We need to keep in mind that our purpose as believers can only be carried out corporately, never on an individual basis only. For example, think about your physical body. Your body parts exist

to make your overall body “look good” as they work together. If your brain sends the command to your arm to move in a certain way, but the message doesn’t get through or the arm doesn’t obey the command, you will look uncoordinated. It’s impossible for the arm to carry out its purpose without regard to the rest of the body. But if all the parts work together in cooperation and harmony, your overall body will “look good” and the purpose of the head will be done.

In the same way, each member of the body of Christ, the church, must learn to work in submission to the head and in cooperation with the other various members. If each part does its task, responsive to Christ and coordinated with the other parts, then Christ is exalted, glorified, or made to “look good” as He truly is. Putting all this together,

Flagstaff Christian Fellowship exists to show how great God is by helping each person grow in fervent love for God, for one another, and for the lost, both locally and globally, through the careful teaching and practice of God’s Word of Truth. In particular, in light of our location, we seek to be a lighthouse to the nearby university community, especially to the international students.

As you may know, the first question I asked Ron Talbott when I called him about the possibility of coming here as pastor just over two years ago was, “Is the church located near the university and does it have a vision for campus outreach?” When he answered affirmatively, I was willing to pursue the position here. Although I was content pastoring in the mountain resort community of Crestline, one factor that kept gnawing at me there was that the nearest university was 45 minutes away. Practically, that church would never have a significant ministry to that campus.

College students have their entire adult lives ahead of them and they’re in the marketplace for ideas about how to live their lives. Satan knows that and floods colleges with a smorgasbord of false religions, godless philosophies, and heathen ways of life. If we can reach students for Christ, they can go on to establish Christian homes, go to the mission field as God impresses them with the need, and devote their adult lives to the cause of Christ. I have a friend in Long Beach, California, who is a committed Christian insurance agent. He taught at a Christian school for many years. He

and his wife have raised a Christian family. They're committed to a strong local church. Both he and his wife were unbelievers who came to Christ during my senior year at Long Beach State through our campus outreach. Humanly speaking, where would they have ended up if we hadn't reached out to them with the good news of Christ?

In particular, I believe we need to be burdened about the international students at NAU. Last year there were 413 students here from about 59 foreign countries. Many of those countries are closed to missionaries. According to Lawson Lau, author of "The World at Your Doorstep," one-third to one-half of the world's top positions in politics, business, education and the military will be filled in the next 25 years by foreign students attending colleges and universities in the United States.

In most cases, these students will be here for four years and many of them want to learn about the American way of life. They are open to our hospitality and friendship. But sadly, only three out of ten will ever see the inside of an American home, and even fewer are ever invited into an American church. Many foreign students feel that Americans don't even care if they exist. In one study done a number of years ago, 40 percent of the foreign students surveyed at 38 Southern universities felt "unwelcome, lonely, and isolated." I believe that if we're not burdened as a church for these dear people God has brought to our community, we're missing a choice opportunity to influence the world for Christ.

God works to accomplish His purpose by giving leaders to His people who have a vision or understanding of what He wants to do, based on His Word, who communicate that vision so that the people are caught up with it, commit themselves to it, and cooperate together in obedience to God to make it happen. There's a great example of this process in Nehemiah. I want to relate that story briefly and then apply it and the theme of last week's message to a specific goal that we as elders think we need to work toward in the coming months.

Chronologically, Nehemiah is at the end of the Old Testament. Over 90 years before, a remnant of Jews had returned to Jerusalem from the Babylonian captivity. They had started the task of rebuilding the temple which had been destroyed, but they soon

became discouraged by the immensity of the job and by some hostile people who had moved into that region during the captivity. About 15 years later, when the Jews had settled into their own homes, God raised up two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, who challenged the people to commit themselves to building God's house of worship. Thus the temple was completed.

About 55-60 years later, in 458 B.C., Ezra returned to Jerusalem with another remnant of Israelites. He sought to reestablish the moral and spiritual heritage of the people, who had strayed far from the God of their fathers. But he also met with great opposition from the people who had moved into the land. About 13 years later, in 445 B.C., Nehemiah, who served as the cupbearer to the Persian king, heard about the deplorable condition of Jerusalem, with its broken walls and gates, and of the people, who were in great distress and reproach (Neh. 1:3). He was deeply burdened by this, and through prayer (Neh.1:4-11) and by seeking the king's permission, he traveled to Jerusalem with the goal of rebuilding the walls of the city so that God's people could worship Him without hindrance and so that their reproach would be taken away as God was exalted again among His people.

Nehemiah faced a number of formidable obstacles to overcome. He no sooner arrived than he ran into severe opposition from the leaders of the people who had moved into the land during the captivity (2:10). He inspected the walls and found things to be in awful condition (2:12-16). The Jewish people were demoralized and resigned to the poor state of things. But Nehemiah was able to encourage the people with his vision of rebuilding the walls, to mobilize them to rise up and build, and to deal with the many problems that arose in the process. The stunning result was that the wall was completed in 52 days (6:15). This demoralized their enemies who recognized that God had done this great thing through His people (6:16).

And so there was a leader with a God-given vision who presented that vision and challenged the people to respond (2:17-18). He didn't and couldn't do it by himself. The people were willing to respond to the vision and to commit themselves to work together to see it happen (2:18). Nehemiah 3 is the thrilling account of how the various people came together and worked shoulder to shoulder,

each doing his part, to see the task accomplished. As chapters 4, 5, and 6 show, there was opposition from without and there were problems and conflicts from within. But under Nehemiah's wise and godly leadership, the job got done. God was glorified, God's people were built up, and the heathen nations around received a witness of God's greatness and power.

Note several things about Nehemiah 3: (1) Some of the people were more suited to the work than others, but almost everyone got involved. Interestingly, there are no professional builders or carpenters listed. But the high priest and his brothers lead the list (3:1). They didn't think the work was beneath them; they were willing to dirty their hands. There were goldsmiths and perfumers (3:8), who certainly weren't used to this kind of hard manual labor. One man apparently didn't have any sons, but his daughters rolled up their sleeves and got involved (3:12). Many of the listings are extended families who worked together. There were a number of leaders or officials who rallied their people and led in the task (3:16-19). About the only guys who refused to get involved were the nobles of Tekoa (3:5), who must have thought such difficult work beneath their dignity. But the common people of Tekoa made up for it by doing double duty (3:5, 27).

(2) As already noted, there were critics from within (3:5) as well as opponents from without. Get any group of people together and you'll always have some who grumble and refuse to get involved. These nobles of Tekoa probably sent Nehemiah a list of reasons why the project couldn't be done!

(3) Some had more undesirable tasks to do than others, but there is no word of complaint. Somebody had to rebuild the Dung (or Refuse) Gate, which no doubt had a unique aroma (3:14)! It's interesting that the man who did it was a descendent of Rechab, whose family obeyed the Lord in the days of Jeremiah, and thus were enabled to remain in the land when almost everyone else was carried off to Babylon (Jeremiah 35). He could have boasted that he was above repairing the Dung Gate because of his godly heritage. But he was willing to be a servant and do his part without complaint.

(4) An overwhelming task became doable when everyone did their part. At least two miles of the city wall was rebuilt or repaired,

along with ten gates. It would have been impossible for one man or even ten men to do, but when everyone joined in, the job got done and those who worked so hard reaped the blessing from God and joined in the joyous celebration (8:10).

Now, let me try to tie all this, along with the theme of last week's text, being generous and ready to share, to where we're at and where we need to go as a church. I want to begin by assuring you that I understand and agree with the fact that the church is not a building, but rather the people of God. If God sends persecution to our land, we may have to break into smaller units and meet secretly in homes. But for now we are able to meet in this facility which, as I already noted, is strategically located near Northern Arizona University.

Some have suggested that we ought to consider selling our buildings and relocating to another part of town. If the church does that, you'll probably be looking for another pastor, because I have a heart to reach out to the campus. I believe that our location within walking distance of the campus is an opportunity, not a liability. As most of you know, besides our main building, we also own the small house in back (used as our nursery), the house to the north of us, the vacant lot diagonally across Beaver Street, and the house to the south of that. There is a small lot between our lot and that house which we do not own, but which I think we need to work toward purchasing. We currently own the house across the street debt-free, but we are forced to rent it and the house next door to make payments on that house.

Recently a recommendation was brought to the elders to sell the house across the street so that we could pay off the house next door and get it fixed up so that we can use it for ministry. As we discussed the pros and cons of that idea, and as I thought and prayed about it, I became increasingly convinced that to sell that property would be short-sighted. With some interior remodeling, we could use both houses right now for ministry purposes. Property within walking distance of our building is hard to come by. So I think that we need to hang on to both properties, as well as purchase the lot between our lot and the house across the street.

Another factor is that the city will not allow us to do any exterior building projects without adding an enormous amount of

parking, but we can make interior changes to existing structures. But the suggestion to sell was made because (and I think rightly) there is a sense that our ministry is bottle-necked because we lack facilities and because it seems like it will be too long to wait to get the house paid off. Those making the suggestion want us to move ahead rather than continue limping along with the current situation.

I did some checking and found out that we had, as of June, 59 payments left on the house, totaling \$37,703 in principle. As I was mulling over the situation, I came across an article in an old magazine titled, "How We Built Our Church Without Borrowing." The pastor who wrote it told of how Larry Burkett had commented to him, "Any church in this country with 200 members should be able to raise \$300,000 at any time." He meant, "raise without borrowing or going into debt." I thought, "Wow, that's \$1,500 per member!"

Then I thought, "How much per member would we need to pay off the mortgage on the house next door and get both houses fixed up so that we could start using them for ministry?" I counted the entries in our church directory and found 211--some individuals, some family units. I realize that some listed there no longer attend here, but also there are many coming who aren't listed there. To be on the conservative side, I took 150 and divided it into \$37,000 and came up with \$250.

I shared this with the elders and they suggested that if we raised the number to \$300, we would have enough to pay off the mortgage and have about \$7,000 left to fix up both houses for ministry. Anything above that could go toward buying the lot across the street, which is valued at around \$20,000. I realize that \$300 represents a major challenge to some of our people. But others could probably give a double, triple, or even greater portion to make up for those who couldn't give that much.

Maybe you're wondering, "What are we going to use the two houses for?" We need to do more specific planning before we make final decisions, but I assure you that we won't have any problem putting them to ministry use! We've had to use the pizza restaurant next door for a college class. We could use the houses for a college class, for high school and junior high groups, or, perhaps even for office space, if we decided to use the current offices for classrooms. We've wanted to have a young couple's class, but

don't have anywhere to meet. Others have suggested the need for a crisis pregnancy center, where young women could receive Christian pro-life counsel and support; and, to have a place where we could have outreach to the Native American and Hispanic people around us. Again, we need to do more planning to confirm the specific uses, but we aren't lacking for immediate ministry needs that these buildings can fill.

Some have wondered, "Shouldn't the money go for missions or directly into people-ministries rather than into buildings?" I share the concern about pouring big bucks into buildings while so many unreached people groups around the world go without the gospel. I want our focus always to be on reaching the unreached. But in my opinion, FCF is not top-heavy on facilities! We need a certain amount of space to carry on the work here and to grow. If we can double the size of our church base, we could easily double the size of our missions budget. But if we stay the same size, we can't expand our missions giving by very much.

So we're not talking about building a modern cathedral for the saints to huddle in! We're not even talking about bulldozing these two old houses and constructing some new modern facilities. We simply need more adequate space to equip God's people for growth in godliness and for outreach to our community. For not much money, we can do that, get this logjam behind us, and move on. I would also add that since this process began, our renter next door gave notice of moving out August 8th. We don't want to find another renter.

So the elders are asking each person in this church, young and old, well-off financially and not-so-well-off, to go before the Lord and prayerfully in faith ask whether He would have you give \$300 or more between now and October 2 so that we can pay off the mortgage and get these buildings in use for ministry. Neither I nor any other elders will know who gives what amount. It is to be a private faith commitment between you and the Lord.

Since we don't want there to be any pressure tactics, we want to give you a week to wait on the Lord, rather than asking for a response today. I'd like each person who feels so led to take home a pledge card, pray over what God would have you do, and bring it back next Sunday. If not enough people respond, then maybe God

is telling us to downsize by selling the property across the street. But I believe in light of the needs, He wants us to move ahead, with every person contributing whatever he or she can, just as every person joined in rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem.

This is a commitment to give over and above your regular giving which is needed to carry on as we are. If you're wondering, "How do I determine how much to give?" I would say, first, ask God to impress you with some amount. I realize that's subjective, but I believe He can lead through impressions if we get our will out of the way and seek Him for His will. Second, trust God to provide a little more than you can comfortably do on your own (see 2 Cor. 8:2-5; 9:8-11). Make sure that you first give yourself to God and that your motive for giving is the grace of the Lord Jesus (2 Cor. 8:5, 9).

If you're wondering, "Where do I get the money to give?" I'd answer, "Ask God, trust God, and be creative!" Maybe, like Barnabas in the early church, He will lead you to sell a tract of land and give the money to His work (Acts 4:36-37). Maybe you have some things that you don't need or that God will impress you to sacrificially give up for this cause. If you ask God to provide the money to give and then look for ways to earn or raise the money, your faith will be strengthened as you watch God answer your prayers.

In December, 1984, seven-year-old Sarah Kreinberg of Portland, Oregon, heard about children going hungry in Ethiopia and decided to send them her own food. When she learned that this wasn't practical, Sarah emptied her piggy bank and donated every nickel, dime, and quarter to Ethiopian relief through a fund set up by her church.

But that wasn't enough for Sarah. A few days later she saw a news photo of an Ethiopian baby and learned that a local bank was matching funds contributed by people for an airlift to the starving Africans. Determined to earn more money to give, she decided to make and sell Christmas-tree ornaments. Sarah's decorations were shiny, red, silk-covered "apples" glued to ice-cream cones, which she carried from door to door in a basket. The little blond girl, with apple cheeks to match the ornaments, was a winning and persistent salesperson. After the holidays, she continued her fund-raising campaign by selling candy.

By April, 1986, Sarah's gifts to Ethiopian children, combined with matching donations, amounted to nearly \$6,500. I should add that Sarah had a special feeling for children who are having trouble staying alive. Since the age of 15 months, Sarah has lived with an inoperable brain tumor (in *Reader's Digest* [4/86], pp. 43-44).

One final story: A woman was teaching Vacation Bible School when a new student was brought in about an hour before the class ended. The new boy only had one arm and the teacher didn't know any details about how he lost his arm or how he had adjusted to it. But she was afraid that the other kids might say something to embarrass him. She couldn't warn them, so she proceeded cautiously.

As the class came to a close, she began to relax. She asked the class to join her in their usual closing ceremony. "Let's make our churches," she said. "Here's the church and here's the steeple, open the doors and there's ..." Then the awful truth of what she was doing hit her. The very thing she feared the other kids would do, she had done, since the one-armed boy couldn't participate! But as she stood there panicked, the little girl next to this boy reached over with her left hand and placed it up to his right hand and said, "Davey, let's make the church together."

That's the only way the church can do God's work: Together! Together, we win and God wins! Let's work together and make His church here a testimony to His great name!

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