

# LIFE'S GATES

## Sermon, February 17, 2019

### Nehemiah 3, John 10:1-10

These past weeks we began taking a look at the Old Testament book of Nehemiah, which is the story of the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls in the fifth century before Christ. As mentioned, this book is so much more than the story of a restoring of walls; it is also a story of the restoring of a people from despair to hope. It's a story of restoring people from shame, desolation and ruin to a new and vital and robust walk of faith with their God. And as mentioned last week, Jerusalem in ruins can also be seen as a picture of a life ... a life created to be the beautiful dwelling place of God's Spirit, but now in need of restoration, salvaging, salvation.

Chapter 3, in addition to being a lector's worst nightmare, seems a supremely unpromising source for sermon material! It consists mainly of list of unpronounceable family names, obscure sections of the walls of Jerusalem, and the names of ten gates: The Sheep Gate, the Fish Gate, the Jeshana (*or Old*) Gate, the Valley Gate, the Dung Gate (*ew!*), the Fountain Gate, the Water Gate (*not to be confused with the one in D.C.*), the Horse Gate, the East Gate, and the Inspection Gate. When you are reading through your Bible, it can be a bit discouraging to come to a chapter like this and you might be tempted (as I was) to skip over it! However, as we affirm after every reading of Scripture during worship, this, too, is the Word of God! Inspired by the Spirit of God, it tells some very important parts of the story of redemption and restoration and salvation, as do all words of the Scriptures. One thing Nehemiah 3 tells us, as one commentator put it, is that names are important ... they are important to historians, yes, but more significantly names are important to God, Who knows us by name. As seen throughout the Bible, He loves to record the names and deeds of His at-times obscure but faithful people ... some names He records by the inspiration of His Spirit working through the human authors who wrote these Bible books, and ALL names of the faithful are divinely recorded in His Book of Life. The Bible tells us names and deeds are all recorded, remembered, an account is kept ... everything we do or don't do is "written down." Part of the good news of the Gospel is that through the grace of Jesus Christ, the not-so-good things we do or don't do can be erased, our slates wiped clean, when we seek forgiveness. But that's (*almost*) another sermon.

Another thing Chapter 3 tells us is that in any work of restoration, especially when it comes to restoring our very lives, we need help and we must seek help. We cannot do it alone. This is portrayed in a very dramatic way throughout this chapter. Everyone engages in the work, and they work together. You see in verse one that the priests began the work; even the clergy are rolling up their sleeves on Work Day and are probably developing blisters and calluses! A number of rulers are also mentioned. Two men, Rephaiah son of Hur (*in the Hebrew, that would be Ben Hur, but not to be confused with Charlton Heston*) and Shallum, son of Hallohesh ... each of whom we are told ruled half the city of Jerusalem ... they are there getting their hands dirty and breaking their backs working on these walls. There are listed gate keepers, guards, farmers, jewelers, merchants, temple servants, women, children ... even perfume makers ... ALL are mentioned as involved and busily engaged in the work. All of them, by the way, were apparently volunteers. Nobody was conscripted or contracted to do this, and no one was paid for their work. Some were residents of Jerusalem and some came from the surrounding cities of Jericho, Tekoa, Mizpah, and other (*unpronounceable*) outlying villages of Judea. So, what we have here is a huge, amazingly diverse group of people coming together and organized to work together for a common purpose of restoration, cooperation, community enhancement and mutual effort. It's a picture of the church ... a huge, amazingly diverse group of people engaged in the ministry of restoration and salvation.

Note that they worked *together*. All through this account we find the phrase, "next to him" worked so and so, and "next to them" worked others. Also note that the author of Nehemiah took note not only of the workers but also the shirkers. Verse 5 says of the men of Tekoa: "*Their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors.*" So it seems God has the names of goof-offs recorded for all posterity as well. When we will not take up our assigned task, when we slack off in the ministry of restoration to which we are ALL called, when we don't do our share of the work even when (*and especially when*) we are quite capable of doing so, God puts our name down in that shirker column, too! (*Think of that the next time the Nominating Committee calls you!*) But do note that the rest of the Tekoans and everyone else all worked, and worked together. They helped one another. Each one had a section of the wall or a gate assigned. And some even exceeded the work they had been given.

Something else to note, too, is that many worked near their homes, right where they lived. Nehemiah allowed each group to work on a section of the wall where they had the greatest vested interest. Verse 10:

Jedaiah "made repairs opposite his house." Verse 23 tells of Benjamin and Hasshub who "made repairs in front of their house," and Azariah "made repairs beside his house." Verse 30 mentions a man by the name of Meshullam who "made repairs opposite his living quarters," the term translated "living quarters" is roughly the Hebrew equivalent of an apartment, a bachelor pad, if you will. So even the unmarried, single guys are hard at work. This is God's design for ministry! Your neighborhood, your office, your home is where your ministry of restoration begins. God has placed us all strategically where He wants us to be. That is why God put you there! Something else to note: Each one *completed* his assigned task. They all apparently stayed on task until they were done; there were none who gave up or gave in or quit the work when their initial enthusiasm wore off. Some had more to do than others, but no one failed -- except the Tekoan goof-offs. But Nehemiah makes sure to tell us in verse 27 how the rest of the Tekoans, without their lazy nobles, took on a whole new section of wall when they were done with their first assignment, so these worked and worked hard in spite of their elite "leadership."

I want to spend the rest of my time looking at one of the ten gates mentioned. Gates are means of access and egress to a city. Gateways are means of access and exit. Pay attention to the gateways, what are you going to let into and out of your "city." If we see building this wall and restoring its gates as a portrayal of a life being rebuilt and restored from ruin, the gateway areas then deserve primary attention. The ten gates mentioned here can each have an allegorical meaning. Each gate instructs us of a part of our lives which needs to be rebuilt, repaired and maintained. I may get to all ten gates eventually, but today we will just look at one.

The first and most important gate slated for repair and restoration is the **Sheep Gate**. This was where the sheep which were to be sacrificed in the Temple were brought in; it's also the gate through which the High Priest himself would "commute" to work. In the work of Jerusalem's restoration, this special gate received primary attention, as if to underscore that our primary attention needs to be given to our religious life. It should also remind us immediately of Jesus' words we just read from the Gospel. *"I tell you the truth, I AM the gate for the sheep."* Jesus is saying to the Pharisees in that reading, **"I am the Sheep Gate."**

As mentioned during the Time with the Children, a typical sheepfold out in the hills of Jesus' time would be these makeshift corrals constructed from stones or hedges of thorns in the shape of a "C," with the open end of the "C" being the opening through which the sheep entered the safety of the pen one at a time after undergoing thorough examination by the shepherd for thorns, injuries, thistles, parasites ... anything that would do the sheep harm. When the sheep were all safely gathered in the pen, the shepherd would then sit or lie down across the opening. The shepherd would then become, literally, the Gate, the Sheep Gate, as he lay down his life to protect the sheep. Jesus goes on to say (10:9), *"I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved, he will come in and go out and find pasture."* Again, in the work of Jerusalem's restoration, Nehemiah 3 tells us this special gate received primary attention; it's where the High Priest himself went to work. In the work of personal restoration, giving primary access to the great High Priest Jesus Christ, allowing him to be the "gateway" of your life, allowing Him to inspect your life, go to work in your life ... well, that should receive our primary attention, as well.

If Jesus is the Gate, that means we should allow nothing to have access to our lives that cannot pass through Jesus. Speaking allegorically, if Jesus the Good Shepherd is the Gate into the "corral" of my heart, that means nothing should get into my heart that cannot pass through Him. Nothing should come into my life, my heart, my soul that can't pass His muster, His inspection, His scrutiny. We shouldn't try to sneak things past Him; to really mix metaphors, we really should not try to pull our wool over His eyes! Our relationships had better be able to pass through the Sheep Gate Jesus before they make their way into our hearts. Our work ethic, our habits, our amusements, our reading and viewing habits ... they all had better be able to pass through Jesus' scrutiny and examination. Because if something can't pass through the Shepherd's scrutiny and approval, then according to Jesus that thing is a destroyer, a potential killer, a thief! Jesus said, *"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."* If whatever it is really can't pass through Jesus, then you should take that right out to the Dung Gate and get rid of it ... because that thing is a thief who will enter in to steal and kill and destroy a part of your very being. I think we all know in our heart of hearts who and what the thieves are in our lives. Just take an honest good hard look at the things or the attitudes or the relationships or the habits that are slowly but surely stealing your life away, robbing you of quality of life, and also robbing those who are affected by your life, those who love you, who depend on you.

This makes Jesus the primary integrating principle of our lives; everything that comes into our lives and everything that goes out from our lives should be able to bear His scrutiny, it should give Him pleasure and cause Him joy, for He is the Sheep Gate. Again, the Sheep Gate is a good place to begin the work of restoration; make sure yours is in good repair! We'll continue our tour of the Gates next time.