

Roll the Credits

Nehemiah – Part XII

Nehemiah 7-11

Introduction

Eugene Petersen wrote these provocative words in his book entitled, *Run With the Horses*,

There is little to admire and less to imitate in the people who are prominent in our culture. We have celebrities, but not saints. Neither the adventure of goodness nor the pursuit of righteousness gets headlines. If, on the other hand, we look around for what it means to be a person of integrity, we don't find much. They aren't easy to pick out. No journalist interviews them. No talk show features them. They're not admired. They're not looked up to. They do not set trends. There is no cash value in them. No Oscars are given for integrity. At year's end, no one compiles a list of the ten best lived lives.

The world does not notice lives that ought to be noticed. The truth of the matter is, neither does the church, most of the time.

Frankly, part of our fallen nature, as people, is to take each other for granted and to ignore the accomplishments and service given to us. They are all around us, but we rarely notice.

Take moms, for example. I recently read the following story,

A man came home from work to find total mayhem in his house. His three children were outside, still in their pajamas, playing in the dirt, with empty food boxes and wrappers strewn all around the front yard. The door to his wife's minivan was open, as was the front door to the house.

Proceeding into the entry, he found an even bigger mess. A lamp had been knocked over and the throw rug was wadded against one wall. In the front room, the TV was loudly blaring, and the family room was littered with toys and several items of clothing. In the kitchen, dishes filled the sink, breakfast food was spilled on the counter, dog food was spilled on the floor, a broken glass lay under the table, and a small pile of sand was spread by the back door.

He quickly ran up the stairs, stepping over toys and more piles of clothes, looking for his wife, worried that she was ill or that something serious had happened. He discovered her in the bedroom, still curled in the bed in her pajamas, reading a novel. There was a half-eaten bagel and a couple of coffee cups on the bedside stand.

She looked up and asked how his day went. He looked at her, bewildered, and asked, "What happened here today?"

She smiled and answered, "You know, every day, when you come home from work, you ask me what in the world did I do all day? Well, today I didn't do it!"

The truth is, even those closest to you will never fully comprehend the scope of your labor and toil! And, unfortunately, most of us do not take the time to discover it.

Think about it – when was the last time you watched a movie and then stayed around to watch the credits as they rolled by? “Indian scout number 43.

Indian scout number 44.” And that musical score that moved you so much and you thought was so beautiful – did you stay to see who composed the music? No! The show is over . . . on to the next event, please.

I find it absolutely fascinating that at the end of Nehemiah, chapter 6, when the show is over, so to speak, and the walls are built, that Nehemiah rolls the credits. The list is long and most of the names are unpronounceable. But, there are some gems tucked inside these credits that God considers profitable for every student of the Bible.

So, before you are tempted to pack up your popcorn bucket and candy wrappers, let us take time to notice some of the men and women who made it happen.

From Rebuilding Walls to Rebuilding People

Nehemiah, chapter 7, please. And, keep your finger at Nehemiah, chapter 11, which has another divinely inspired list of names and numbers – all representing many people who, behind the scenes, made Jerusalem thrive.

Enlisting – singers, Levites, gatekeepers, guards, leaders (7:1-2)

The first group of people enlisted and mentioned in the credits by Nehemiah are found in verses 1 and 2.

Now it came about when the wall was rebuilt and I had set up the doors, and the gatekeepers and the singers and the Levites were appointed, that I put Hanani my brother, and Hananiah the commander of the fortress, in charge of Jerusalem . . .

Now turn to chapter 11 and notice in verses 22 and 23 that,

. . . the sons of Asaph, who were the singers for the service of the house of God. For there was a commandment from the king concerning them and a firm regulation for the song leaders day by day.

Remember, for years the people of Israel had been in captivity, and then, for a century beyond that, had been in a foreign land. There was not much to sing about while in the Babylonian captivity.

Psalms, chapter 137, tells us that they sat down and wept by the rivers of Babylon. They hung up their harps on the branches of the willow trees.

Yet, in the book of Nehemiah, they are tuning their instruments. In the book of Nehemiah, there are eight references to giving thanks to God. There is a need for musicians to sing of God’s faithfulness at the temple. Music is not incidental to worship, it is essential to worship.

On the occasion of Dallas Seminary’s fiftieth anniversary, the seminary published a special hymnal called, *Hymns of Jubilee*. Dr. Edwin Deibler wrote, in the prologue of that hymnal. His words, quoted in *Nehemiah, God’s Builder*, by Richard Seume, are the following,

From earliest times, the people of God have employed music to give expression of their adoration of the triune God. Succeeding generations of Christians, to our present day, have adopted poetry set to music to express their adoration, praise, aspirations, and prayer. Often, perhaps nearly always, such expressions have exceeded in intensity the actual life-styles of the congregations who employed them. If Christian experience were, even for a period of one week, brought to the level of Christian hymns, a great revival would sweep over the world.

I find it fascinating, ladies and gentlemen, that before revival occurs in Nehemiah, chapter 8, the musicians and choirs are re-formed in chapter 7.

While the singers provided the praise for the city of Jerusalem, the gatekeepers provided protection for the city. They are mentioned in chapter 7 and in chapter 11. Notice verse 19 of chapter 11.

Also the gatekeepers, Akkub, Talmon, and their brethren, who kept watch at the gates, were 172.

“Hey, Akkub and Talmon, what do you guys do?”

“We open and shut the gates and then, we watch to make sure nobody gets in who shouldn’t.”

I found it interesting to learn that the Great Wall of China was breached by invaders at least four different times. Each time the Chinese guards were bribed.

Gates are only as good as the character of the guards. By the way, every believer is a gatekeeper.

John Bunyan, the author of *Pilgrim’s Progress*, also wrote a book called, *The Holy War*. In that book, he talked about “Mansoul,” a city that had five gates. The gates were:

- the Ear Gate,

- the Eye Gate,
- the Nose Gate,
- the Feel Gate,
- the Mouth Gate.

The enemy of Mansoul would, daily, attack at one of the gates. He would speak through the Ear Gate or paint vivid and alluring pictures to the Eye Gate. The interesting thing is that Mansoul, in Bunyan's allegory, could never be toppled by outside attacks. The only way the enemy could conquer the city was if someone on the inside opened one of the gates to the enemy.

Solomon wrote, in Proverbs, chapter 4, verse 23,

Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.

In other words, guard carefully what you allow through the gates of your life that will, ultimately, impact your heart and soul.

Turn back to Nehemiah chapter 7. Nehemiah knew that he needed help leading the city of Jerusalem, so he chose two men. Verse 2 reads,

. . . I put Hanani my brother, and Hananiah the commander of the fortress, in charge of Jerusalem . . .

At this point, friends, the walls are up, the doors are hung, and now, Nehemiah needs someone to help him lead the city government and its people. Whom do you look for?

Well, you would look for a person with experience. That makes sense. You would look for someone who has the stature and bearing that people automatically follow. That makes sense. If you are looking for someone to command, you need someone who knows how to be a commander, right?

Wrong. Notice the two qualities Nehemiah was looking for, in verse 2b.

. . . for he was a faithful man and feared God more than many.

The Hebrew word, translated "feared," comes from "yare," which means to reverence or to honor.

What a great lesson for the church and any other missionary enterprise. We tend to follow the world's leading in looking for people to fill the slots, appointments, and ministries. We look for people who tend to be experienced, who look good on the outside, who can communicate and articulate the party line, and who have a natural bearing about them that draws attention to their winsome personalities and natural abilities.

Would you notice that the two qualities Nehemiah mentioned had nothing to do with what you could see? They were inner qualities of dependability and reverence for God.

Registering – citizens, priests (7:5-65)

The next part of chapter 7 finds Nehemiah registering the citizens. They were identified by family, clan, or tribe, and they were counted. Notice just a few of them in verses 8 through 12.

The sons of Parosh, 2,172; the sons of Shephatiah, 372; the sons of Arah, 652; the sons of Pahath-moab of the sons of Jeshua and Joab, 2,818; the sons of Elam, 1,254.

Why count them so carefully? They were counted by God, because they counted to God. If there was ever anyone interested in the credits, anyone who read the credits – in fact, He is the original author of credits – it is God Himself.

In verse 39, the priests are accounted for and counted. They had to prove their lineage to Aaron or they would not be allowed to serve in the temple. In fact, look at verse 61 and then at verse 64.

And these were they who came up from Tel-melah, Tel-harsha, Cherub, Addon, and Immer; but they could not show their fathers' houses or their descendants, whether they were of Israel . . . These searched among their ancestral registration, but it could not be located; therefore they were considered unclean and excluded from the priesthood.

You need to also know that the people were excluded from living inside the city, if they could not trace their family heritage back to pre-dispersion Jewish people. The priests were excluded from serving in the temple, if they could not prove their ancestry.

God had a standard for owning land within the city of Jerusalem and for serving within the temple. You had to have Jewish blood flowing through your veins – and you had to have written proof of your genealogy. Without it, you could not live in Jerusalem and you could not serve the Lord in the temple.

Ladies and gentlemen, what right do you have of ever living within the New Jerusalem? The book of Revelation tells us that only those redeemed by Jesus Christ will be able to dwell in the Holy City of

heaven. Will you be able to trace your lineage back to the family of God? Are you a relative of God?

You might ask, “How do I become a part of God’s family?”

Well, first you have to understand that you are not.

Jesus Christ, as recorded in Matthew, chapter 7, verses 22 through 23, said,

Many will say to me on that day, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?” And then I will declare to them, “I never knew you . . .”

The pressing question in Nehemiah, chapters 7 and 11, was, “Were they related to Israel? Could they prove their blood relationship to the nation of Jews, the people of *the* God?”

The pressing question in the last day of human history, as we know it, will be, “Are you related to that Jewish carpenter? Can you prove your relationship to the family of God?”

God is keeping a list of names. It is called the Lamb’s book of life. In the book of Revelation, chapter 20, verse 15, it tells us,

And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

You might ask, “How can I get my name registered in the family of God?”

The book of John, chapter 1, verses 12 through 13, gives the answer.

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become the children of God . . . who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

When you receive Him, as John tells us we must, when you say, “Lord, I’m not related to your family; I’m not on my way to heaven, I’m on my way to hell; I’m in the wrong family, I want to become a member of yours,” then you are born again into the family of God.

Donating – some who gave (7:70-73)

Now back to Nehemiah, chapter 7, where we find the people making donations.

I think the saddest word in chapter 7 is a word that appears two times – once in verse 70 and once in verse 71. It is the word, “some.”

And some from among the heads of fathers’ households gave to the work. . . . And some of the heads of fathers’ households gave into the treasury of the work . . .

It ought to read “all.” All! But no, just some.

Now, you may have noted the problem of chapter 7, verse 4, which said,

Now the city was large and spacious, but the people in it were few and the houses were not built.

There is this big city with finished walls, but hardly any people on the inside!

The problem was solved in two ways.

Drafting – one out of every ten (11:1)

First, there was a draft. In chapter 11, verse 1, we read,

Now the leaders of the people lived in Jerusalem, but the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of ten to live in Jerusalem, the holy city, while nine-tenths remained in the other cities.

About a million people lived around Jerusalem. So, about 100,000 of them were drafted to come and live within the city walls.

Now I am sure, as with any draft, there were some draft dodgers hiding out in the hills. At least here, I would imagine that most of them moved their families and their belongings to Jerusalem.

Volunteering – noble ones (11:2)

There is a second group of people also. Read further to verse 2.

And the people blessed all the men who volunteered to live in Jerusalem.

The Hebrew word for volunteer is an absolutely wonderful word. It is the word “nadab,” and it means, “to be impelled by an inner urge to stand, to be compelled to be courageous.” It can be translated to read, “to be noble.”

They stepped forward and said, “We will leave our countryside. We will uproot our families. We will leave our homes and relatives. We will move to the city of Jerusalem and see to it that the holy city thrives.”

What better word is there to describe them than the word noble?

Praying – thanksgiving (11:17)

And, among the noble ones was someone known for his praying.

There is a special mention of a man named Mattaniah in verse 17 of chapter 11.

And Mattaniah the son of Mica, the son of Zabdi, the son of Asaph, who was the leader in beginning the thanksgiving at prayer . . .

I love this entry in the long line of credits. Who was he? We do not really know. What did Mattaniah do? He was just the one who started the prayer. He was the Levite who stood up at the appropriate time and began the prayer of thanksgiving. The only time he is ever mentioned in scripture, this noble man is praying.

Two Lessons For The Ones Deserving Credit!

Let us tie our thoughts together with two final principles of application.

Most of the noble things you do . . .

1. Most of the noble things you do will never be recognized on earth.

In fact, there may be those who notice but do not appreciate what they do see you doing.

One pastor, from Lubbock, Texas, sent in a funny story that illustrates my point.

For twenty-five years he held services at a nursing home. When he began holding these meetings, as a young pastor, he noticed that one of the regulars, who came, would bring her television remote with her. Periodically, while he preached, she would scowl, aim that remote at him, and push the buttons. This went on for several months or so, until he finally stopped one service, laughed good-naturedly, and said to her, “Ma’am, you can’t turn me off with that.”

She just snapped back, without blinking an eye, “I’m not trying to turn you off. I’m just trying to get a different channel.”

Do not dare bring remotes next Sunday!

Frankly, I happen to feel appreciated every Sunday. Someone invariably says, “Hello,” and something kind. They probably feel obligated. But I

wonder how many people will serve today and not get one “Hello”? How many nursery workers will hand a baby over the counter to their parents without ever hearing, “Thank you for volunteering”? How many Sunday school teachers, musicians, ushers, teachers will come and do noble things and never be noticed?

The city of Jerusalem flourished because of the gatekeepers and guards, the maintenance workers and grounds keepers, the singers, priests, farmers, shepherds and other contributors to the city who pulled their weight. The truth is, that ancient city and the church today have a lot in common – neither one came make it one day without noble people who make it happen.

I can tell you, from my own ministry, I am surrounded by a staff of highly dedicated men and women who pull it together. If it is organized, I did not do it. If it sounds good, I did not write it. If I show up on time, I was probably reminded. Someone, recently, was surprised to learn, from me, that I do not plan our Sunday morning services. Our worship pastor and his staff plan it and arrange all the details, usually weeks in advance. I simply get an order of service handed to me and it has a line, somewhere near the bottom of the list of events, that reads, “Message – Stephen.”

So far, they have kept me in the lineup. But, who knows, one day I will get an order of service and it will say, “Stephen – take a hike!”

Every church, missions organization, ministry, and Christian cause is moved forward, not by a few of us who are seen, but by an unseen labor force of staff members, prayer warriors, and volunteers throughout the congregation whose hearts have moved them to do noble things. These are noble things that will probably never be fully calculated and rewarded on earth.

That leads me to my second point of application that is especially designed for everyone who serves someone else.

None of the noble things you do . . .

2. While most of the noble things you do will never be recognized on earth, principle number two is that none of the noble things you do on earth will go unrecognized by God in heaven.

The writer of Hebrews addressed that when he wrote, in chapter 6, verse 10,

God is not unjust so as to forget your work . . . in having ministered . . . to the saints.

People forget; people do not say, "Thank you;" people overlook you, but God never will. He always reads the credits. Better yet, He is in the process, at this very moment, of writing them.

So, let us roll the credits and read of noble ones who change the diapers and sweep those floors; answer the telephones and pull the weeds; arrange meetings and teach the Bible lessons; prepare the children's games and "juice up" the sound board; clean the bathrooms and count the offering; practice the music and type the letters; pray through that list and visit those guests; cook the meals and teach the class; dust the furniture and greet the family; translate the sermon and duplicate the tapes; park the cars and get the coffee made; disciple that teenager and lead a child to the water fountain; design the brochures and stuff the Communiqués with inserts; crawl on the floor with toddlers and set up chairs in the classroom; wash and dry the nursery linen and clean the dishes

after a church activity; recruit even more volunteers or thank those who do; plan class activities and counsel at summer camp; listen to memory verses and stack the tables and chairs; unload all the equipment and then load it back up again, only to be unloaded and then loaded up again, and again, and again.

Know, as you do it all, that it is all noble work. It is noble work for the people and ministry of Christ that may go unrecognized on earth, but, one day, will be rewarded in heaven.

The question is, who are you doing it for anyway? If it is for the attention of people, forget it, they will never sit still long enough to read the credits. If it is for the glory and pleasure of God, take heart, He has not overlooked even one noble deed!

It was said of Jerusalem, in the days of Nehemiah, that some gave of themselves. Let it be said of us, that we all gave of ourselves, that all of us were noble sons and daughters of God.

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