

Don't be Paralyzed – Get Organized!

by Ray C. Stedman

I saw a cartoon recently of two men at a party. Each had a drink in his hand, and they were sitting on the stairway talking while the party was going on. (That is where party philosophers like to hold forth). One said to the other, "My view is this: reality is something that you should always treat with respect, but it should not be allowed to control your life."

Many people seem to feel that way today. They are fleeing from reality, regarding it as unnecessary. But in the book of Nehemiah we are learning how to return to reality after we have experienced the ruin that comes from following illusion.

Chapter 3, to which we come today, is one of those chapters that appears to consist largely of unpronounceable names and long forgotten people! When you are reading through your Bible, it may be discouraging to come to a chapter like this. But it tells the story of the work of repairing the gates and walls of Jerusalem which Nehemiah had been sent there by King Artaxerxes of Persia to do. He first aroused the people to the work, and this chapter tells how that work was actually accomplished.

One commentator has said, "God is a great believer in putting names down." That is true. There are many chapters like this in the Scriptures. But that should really encourage us. It means that God has not forgotten our names either. He loves to record the names of obscure people. He may be writing your name down in some great book right now that others will read in times to come.

The central teaching of a chapter like this is that, in putting lives back together, we need and

must seek help from each other. We cannot do it alone. This is a great chapter about cooperation. It illustrates the New Testament truth concerning the body of Christ. First Corinthians 12, Romans 12, and other chapters, teach that believers in Christ are part of a worldwide body made up of many members. We belong to each other and so we are to help one another and bear one another's burdens. This is portrayed in a very dramatic way throughout this chapter. The chapter is too long for us to read in detail but if you will follow with me we will discover four important principles for working together.

We learn from the New Testament that there are two things you cannot say any longer when you have become a Christian. The first is, "You do not need me." Everyone in the body of Christ needs everyone else. The second thing is, "I do not need you." You do need others! It is the awareness of that truth that makes a church a living, warm, vital, loving fellowship. I hope we are finding this out more and more here.

In a moment we shall look at the importance of keeping in repair the gates of our lives. Gates, in Scripture, are means of access and egress. They represent ways of entering into other people's lives and also letting them into ours, of reaching out to others, and allowing them to share our thinking and feeling. As we go through this chapter we shall look in particular at each gate in Jerusalem because each designates a particular quality of the life that we need. The passage from Second Peter which was read to us this morning is a very practical example of what I am talking about:

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. {2 Pet 1:5-7 NIV}

This exhortation to add certain qualities to our behavior is a marvelous explanation of what it means to repair the gates of our lives. As we do so we will be no longer unfruitful and unproductive. The book of Nehemiah therefore is a picture in Old Testament terms of someone who is restoring the walls and gates of his life.

Before we do that I want to skim through this chapter with you briefly and point out some of the principles for working together that are found in it.

Here is the first one. In summoning the people of Jerusalem to rebuild their walls and their gates we learn from this chapter that **all the people were involved** in the project. The whole city gave itself over for a period of 52 days to building the walls and the gates. That portrays for us a very important principle of the New Testament: that the ministry of the church in the world today belongs to everyone in the congregation.

Once, people thought that only the pastor and the hired staff were to do the work of evangelizing, teaching, counseling, healing the hurts of others and serving the needy. Because we have followed that practice far too long, the church is in trouble all over the world. But the ministry belongs to the whole congregation.

That is what we see demonstrated in this third chapter.

For example look at Verses 1-2:

Eliashib the high priest and his fellow priests went to work and rebuilt me Sheep Gate. They dedicated it and set its doors in place, building as far as the Tower of the Hundred, which they dedicated, and as far as the Tower of Hananel. The men of Jericho built the adjoining section, and Zaccur son of Imri built next to them. {Neh 3:1-2 NIV}

Notice that everyone is involved. The priests began the work. That may encourage some who think that preachers never do any work except on

Sundays! And with them the Levites worked. A number of rulers are also mentioned. Two men, each of whom ruled half the city of Jerusalem, are getting their hands dirty working on these walls. There were gate keepers, guards, farmers, even perfume makers were involved in the work. I don't know what they did. Their hands probably were pretty soft, but nevertheless they worked on the walls. There were jewelers, pharmacists, merchants and temple servants.

Even women were directly involved, as Verse 12 points out:

Shallum, son of Hallohesh, ruler of a half-district of Jerusalem, repaired the next section with the help of his daughters. {Neh 3:12 NIV}

I wish I had read that to my family years ago when my four daughters were home! They are gone now, so I must rely on someone else's daughters to help me out. Undoubtedly, the wives of these workers did what women always have done through the centuries. They cooked food, served meals, and kept the men at work. But here were women who worked right along with the men. It is encouraging to see this demonstration of equality even in those days.

All of them, by the way, were volunteers. Nobody was conscripted to do this; and no one was paid for their work. There is an interesting mention at the end of Verse 16 about a man who built the wall "as far as the artificial pool and the House of Heroes."

I do not know who occupied the House of the Heroes in those days, but I was in San Antonio last week at a board meeting of Bible Study Fellowship, that wonderful organization that holds women's and men's classes all over the country and around the world. There they have built a series of apartments which they call "The House of Heroes." It is used for all the volunteers who come and devote a week, two weeks, sometimes six or eight weeks, even several months, to helping out in the work of that ministry, thereby saving that organization tens of thousands of dollars every year. They call them the "heroes of faith," so they have the House of Heroes for them to live in.

Here is a long list of volunteers like that. Some were residents of Jerusalem and some came from

the surrounding cities of Jericho, Tekoa, Mizpah, and other outlying villages of Judea.

So it is also in the body of Christ. We are all engaged in the ministry. I do not know any truth more important for the accomplishing of God's work than that. Yet, in church after church, it is difficult to get people to understand that. You have the great privilege of reaching out in your own neighborhood and doing the work of the ministry there. Where churches do not understand that one finds a very distorted condition. People do not know what to do, religiously. They have no ministry of their own and, therefore, little excitement or interest in life. Someone has well described them in a little jingle that says:

The pastor is late,
He's forgotten the date.
And what will the people do then,
Poor things!

They'll sit in the pew,
With nothing to do,
And sing a collection of hymns.
Poor things!

I am afraid that describes many churches today.

The second principle that emerges from this chapter is: **They worked together.** All through this account you will find the phrase, "next to him" worked so and so, and "next to them" worked others. They took note not only of the workers but also the shirkers, however. Verse 5 says of the men of Tekoa: "their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors." Did you know that God records goof-offs too? When you will not take up your ministry, God puts your name down in that column as well. But the rest all worked and worked together. They helped one another. Nehemiah had so marvelously organized this that each one had a section of the wall or a gate assigned to him. And some exceeded the work they had been given.

Look, for instance, at Verse 13:

The Valley Gate was repaired by Hanun and the residents of Zanoah. ... They also repaired five hundred yards of the wall as far as the Dung Gate. {Neh 3:13 NIV}

Note the *also*. They exceeded their allotment and went on to help somebody else to the extent of repairing 500 yards of wall (an enormous section; probably much of it was still standing and needed little repair). You will find other mentions of men who did their work and then repaired "another" section.

Then the third principle of cooperation is this: **They worked near their home.** Look at Verse 10: Jedaiah "made repairs opposite his house." Verse 23 tells of certain men 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 son of Berekiah, who "made repairs opposite his living quarters" (*chamber* is the word). This man was apparently a bachelor. He had an apartment but he had no family, nevertheless, he worked right where he was.

The important truth that emerges is that this is God's design for ministry. God has placed us all strategically where he wants us to be. Your neighborhood, office, or home is where your ministry should be. That is why God put you there. In John 15, Jesus said to his disciples that he had appointed them, and the word means "strategically placed them." He had put them in the place where he wanted them to be. This is brought out beautifully here as we watch these people laboring in their own neighborhood.

The fourth principle found here is: **Each one completed his assigned task.** They kept on until they had finished the work. Some had more to do than others, but no one failed – except the "nobles" of Tekoa who would not dirty their hands.

I have learned through the years that responsibility is always the mark of spiritual maturity. The most mature members in a congregation are those who stay with the work that has been assigned to them until it is done.

I want to spend the rest of my time looking in specific detail at the work they were doing. As we have seen, building a wall and restoring its gates is an illuminating portrayal of a life that is being rebuilt from ruin. You may be hurting right now in some area where you are exposed to peril by some habit you have picked up. You may have a burned gate where evil has access to you. You can be invaded easily and are upset quickly. This account

reveals **the areas which you need to rebuild** if you want to find deliverance and safety.

As we go through this we shall see that each of these gates has a particular meaning which is given to us in the symbol contained in the name of the gate. I know some people have trouble with this kind of an approach. They call it “allegorizing the Scriptures,” or sometimes, “spiritualizing the text.” And they are right, in a sense. There is a danger in working with symbols. It is easy for the imagination to take over and assign arbitrary meanings which have no relation to the text. That has resulted in the past in some very serious abuses of Scripture.

Somebody has well said, “He who spiritualizes lacks ‘spiritual eyes’ and tells ‘spiritual lies.’”

Nevertheless, there is a legitimate way to use the symbols of Scripture. The Apostle Paul uses allegory and also tells us that “all these things happened to Israel as types (or symbols) for us, upon whom the end of the ages has come,” {cf, 1 Cor 10:11}. If we observe the primary law of Scripture, that Scripture must interpret itself, we can proceed safely through an account like this. All of these symbols have been used elsewhere in Scripture. And they are consistently used. That is our guideline as we look at this.

Let us go back to the beginning again, and look at the gates:

1. The first gate mentioned is the **Sheep Gate**. This was located where now St. Stephen's Gate, sometimes called the Lion Gate, stands. It is at the northeast corner of the city. Here in Nehemiah's Jerusalem it was called the Sheep Gate, because it was there where the sheep which were to be sacrificed in the temple courts were kept.

It reminds us immediately of Isaiah's great word about Jesus, “as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth,” {cf, Isa 53:7}. Remember also that John the Baptist greeted our Lord with the words, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,” {cf, John 1:29}. Sheep are therefore a symbol of sacrifice in Scripture.

The Sheep Gate is the principle of the cross at work in a Christian's life: It is where you began your life as a Christian. There is to be a principle of death at work in your life – the death of your natural self. The phrase that

is emblazoned across the front of this auditorium, “You are not your own, you are bought with a price,” expresses that principle beautifully. It is the cross at work. Have you acknowledged that? When you came to Christ you gave up control of your own life. You are no longer to do only what you feel like doing. You are called to obey him, to follow him and walk with him. That means that some of your desires, some of your natural longings, must be put to death. That is the principle of the cross. The Apostle Paul reminds us that we are crucified with Christ unto the world, and the world is crucified unto us. This is the gate that must be kept in repair if you want to grow into a strong Christian.

2. In this counter-clockwise tour around the wall of Jerusalem, the next gate is the **Fish Gate**. This would be close to the spot where the present Damascus Gate is found. It is called the Fish Gate because the fishermen from Galilee and the coast brought their fish into the city through this gate.

Immediately it reminds us of what our Lord said to his disciples: “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men,” {Matt 4:19 KJV}. Throughout the Old Testament fishing is a symbol of witnessing to others, of the necessity of acknowledging that you belong to Christ. You witness by your words and actions.

Years ago I asked a High School kid who had been at a summer camp, “How did you get along as a Christian there?” He replied, “Oh, they never found out I was a Christian.” That indicated a Fish Gate that needed to be repaired.

We are called to be fishers of men.

3. Then we come to the Jeshanah Gate, which in Hebrew means the “**Old Gate**.” It would be located somewhere near the present Jaffa Gate. This gate represents the old ways of truth versus the new illusions of error. The world is constantly proposing something new – the New Age movement, for instance – but Scripture calls us back to the old way. Jeremiah in his sixth chapter says, “Ask for the old paths. Ask for the good way and walk therein,” {cf, Jer 6:16}.

Somebody has well said, “If something is new, it is not true; and if it is true, then it is now new.” That is because truth remains the same throughout the centuries. Truth never changes. So this gate calls us back to the basics of life, back to the time-tested paths that have led to stability, security, and order.

What are some of these? One that is widely ignored today is that we live in a fallen world; our world is not perfect. It was not intended that it should be after the Fall. We must constantly remind ourselves of that fact and take that into consideration in all relationships. But, nevertheless, we are under a sovereign God, and he can do what he wants:

- We can come to him,
 - and believe in him,
 - and be born again.
- We can learn the love that disciplines,
 - power that serves,
 - zeal that can wait,
 - hope that endures, and
 - strength that helps others.

Those are the old paths. That is what this gate reminds us of.

4. In Verse 13 we come to the **Valley Gate**. This would be located at the southwestern corner of Jerusalem. A valley in Scripture always represents humility and the judgment of conceit in our lives. John Stott calls humility “that rarest and fairest of Christian virtues.” If pride is the ultimate sin, then humility, its opposite, is the ultimate virtue. Peter tells us, “God resists the proud, but he gives grace to the humble,” {cf, 1 Pet 5:5}.

I often remind myself of that verse when I am tempted to be proud. I remember that feeling and acting in pride means that God will start resisting me. Do you want God working against you? Then go on with your pride.

He has ways of resisting that can never be overcome. God resists the proud, yes, but he gives grace and help to the humble!

Thus the primary goal of believers is to maintain a sense of humility:

- We do not have it all together.
- We are not smart enough to find all the answers ourselves.

- We do not know how to handle all the difficulties into which we come.

The world applauds pride. It tries to make every individual feel capable of handling anything that comes. It even applauds arrogance. But God applauds humility. This is the first lesson in the school of the Spirit. Jesus said, “Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly of heart, and you will find rest to your soul,” {cf, Matt 11:29}. One of the reasons why many people are so restless today is that they have never learned to be humble to be meek and lowly of heart.

5. Then in Verse 14 we come to the **Dung Gate**. That is not a very pleasant name, but it is a necessary activity. It is the gate of elimination, the gate where all the rubbish and corrupt things in the city were brought to the garbage dump in the Hinnom Valley, outside Jerusalem.

It is necessary to have an elimination gate in our lives as well. Paul urges us, “Cleanse yourselves from all filthiness of flesh and spirit,” {cf, 2 Cor 7:1}. One of the reasons many people are unable to function as God wants is because they seldom use the Dung Gate. They do not deal with their secret sin, with private corruption in their own lives. Jesus warned that doing so may be very painful. He said it may be like cutting off an arm or plucking out an eye. But it is something that has to be done or otherwise it leads to ruin.

6. The sixth gate (Verse 15) is the **Fountain Gate**. This was at the end of the Pool of Siloam, low in the valley in the south. It speaks, of course, of a fountain springing up and reminds us of Jesus’ words in John 7 where he spoke of “rivers of living water” {John 7:38} which would come from believers in him. By that he describes the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

So here is the Spirit-filled life, overflowing to others. As the Apostle Paul said, “Keep being filled with the Spirit,” {cf, Eph 5:18}. You will notice it comes immediately after the Dung Gate. After the corruption is cleansed away by the consent of the believer, then the cleansing of the Spirit washes clean.

7. In Verse 26 we come to the **Water Gate**. This is located at the spring of Gihon, where Hezekiah's tunnel begins. (This is not the famous Watergate in Washington, DC!) In Chapter 8 we learn that this is the place where Ezra reads the Law of God to the people.

Water, in Scripture, is the symbol of the Word of God. This is the gate that reminds us of our need for the Word of God. The interesting thing about this account is that they did not repair the Water Gate. It did not need repair. The Word of God never needs improvement or repair for it lasts forever. It is indestructible. What it needs is to be re-inhabited.

I wonder how many of us need to re-inhabit this gate, and begin again to read and study the Word of God? Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Man does not live by bread alone," {cf, Matt 4:4, Luke 4:4}. Well, then, what does he live by? "By every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God," {cf, Matt 4:4}. If you want your life filled to the full and enjoying what God intended you to have, it will only be as you come to understand the Word of God.

8. Then, reading on, in Verse 28 we come to the **Horse Gate**. This would be found on the eastern wall of Jerusalem. The horse is always the symbol of battle in Scripture.

This is the gate that reminds us that we are not on a picnic:

- We are not in a rest home.
- We are not on a Caribbean cruise.
- We are on a battlefield!
- We are going to be under attack.
- We are going to be assaulted by surprising events.

There is much joy in the Christian life, but it will not always be without struggle. Everybody is going to face battle. We need to be alert to the fact of spiritual warfare.

I often think of Isaac Watts' great hymn,

Must I be carried to the skies
On flowery beds of ease,
While others fought to win the prize,
And sailed through bloody seas?

Nay, I must fight if I would win.
Increase my courage, Lord.

I'll bear the toil, endure the pain,
Supported by Thy Word.

This is the lesson of the Horse Gate.

9. Then we come to the ninth gate, the **East Gate**, mentioned in Verse 29. Today this is called the Golden Gate. It is on the eastern side, opposite the temple area and facing the rising sun. Thus, it is the gate that speaks of hope and expectation. It is the gate through which the returned Messiah will enter the city of Jerusalem.

This is the gate that is often in ruins in people's lives today:

- After the first service this morning, a woman came and told me with tears about a friend of hers who has lost hope. She feels defeated and despairing. She does not want to live any more.
- The newspapers last week recorded the tragic story of a mother who lost hope and actually put her two children to death because she saw them having to live in a world that was hopeless. This is a common condition with people all around us.

What does the East Gate tell us? It tells us that God has yet a glory awaiting those who trust him. The story of life does not end in despair and tragedy. Jesus said to his disciples, "When you see all these things coming to pass, lift up your heads and rejoice, for your redemption is drawing near," {cf, Luke 21:28}. We ought to be like tea kettles – even when they are up to their necks in hot water, they are still singing!

10. Then the last gate is the **Inspection Gate**, mentioned here in Verse 31. The word in Hebrew means "the appointed place." If you are familiar with the book of Hebrews, in the New Testament, you will recall 9:27, "It is appointed unto man once to die, and after that the judgment" {Heb 9:27 KJV} – the inspection!

It is a reminder that we must give an account of our journey:

- We must learn at last the truth about our lives as God sees it.
- We will see all that has happened, exactly the way it really was.

And yet Scripture encourages us by assuring us that it is not a place of condemnation, but rather, as Paul says in First Corinthians 3, “everyone shall receive commendation” from God {cf, 1 Cor 3:8, 3:14}. It is the place for the giving of rewards, for the acknowledgment of faithful service.

Then at the end of the chapter we come again to the Sheep Gate, where we began. The Sheep Gate stands for the cross and the cross must be at the beginning and at the end of our lives. Undergirding everything is this principle, out of death comes life. Out of the subjection of our natural desires to the will of God comes the life of God filling us full and blessing our hearts.

I remember as a young boy, not even in my teens yet, learning a hymn that has stayed in my memory ever since. We do not sing it very often these days. The words are simple, but they are very meaningful. It is called *The Way of the Cross*:

I must needs go home by the way of the cross,
There's no other way but this;
I shall ne'er get sight of the gates of light,
If the way of the cross I miss.

I must needs go on in the bloodsprinkled way,
The path that the Savior trod,
If I ever climb to the heights sublime,
Where the soul is at home with God.

The way of the cross leads home,
The way of the cross leads home,
It is sweet to know as I onward go,
The way of the cross leads home.

Isn't this wonderful teaching in this book of Nehemiah?

As we compass the walls of Jerusalem, each gate instructs us of the part of our life which needs to be watched, and rebuilt, and repaired.

You may find some areas that need repair as you look at your own life today. This is what Nehemiah (and Peter) call us to do: to repair these gates and help ourselves become all that God intended us to be.

Prayer:

Thank you, our Father, for this great truth. We pray that the Spirit of grace will make these gates real to us. Point out those areas that need to be worked on in our lives that we may enter into the full security and safety that you have for us. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.