

Preparing for Harvest: Participating in Community

Then I said to them, “You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace”... “They replied, “Let us start rebuilding.” So they began this good work – Nehemiah 2:17-18

Background

Israel had gone through a period of captivity, where Jerusalem itself had been all but destroyed. Through the providence of God, many of the Israelites were allowed to go back to Jerusalem to rebuild it. They started on their goal, only to be thwarted by people who were against the plan, and the end result they were looking for – their harvest – remained “un-reaped” for 20 years.

Again God intervened and brought in prophets to encourage the Israelites to get back to the task at hand, and in 516 BC they celebrated the completion of the temple. With this accomplished, Israel could begin to restore the remainder of the land.

Fast forward approximately 70 years. Nehemiah is serving in the court of the king, Artaxerxes. A fellow Israelite comes back from Jerusalem and gives Nehemiah news he doesn’t want to hear: the people are distressed, the walls broken, and the gates are burned.

Nehemiah felt the responsibility for the task, and set out to finish what was started so many years ago.

Eating Elephants

This particular harvest for Israel was no small task. Rebuilding an entire community, especially in the face of extreme opposition can take a lot out of anyone. We can try to guess what happened during those 70 years to keep them from finishing the work, but often we don’t have to look that far. Like the Israelites, we too have “elephants” we are faced with – harvests that we are able to participate in that appear to be more than we can handle. This happens for many reasons:

- ❖ **Fatigue** – the Israelites had been working tirelessly on two separate occasions to build the temple. With that much work, it can start to wear on the body as well as the soul. Paul told the Galatians that they would reap *if they didn’t give up or faint*. Reaping takes work, and will only happen if we can work through it.
- ❖ **Frustration** – *Then the peoples around them set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building. They hired counselors to work against them to frustrate their plans – Ezra4:4-5.* We have in our mind how the harvest should happen, how long it should take, even what will go right in the process. Whether the source is internal or external, there are things that

rise up to frustrate our cause, and those things don't necessarily stop once we are at the point of frustration. When Jesus went into the wilderness, we concentrate on the "three temptations" the devil brought, but a closer look at the scripture shows that Jesus was "40 days tempted of the devil". Satan tried to frustrate Jesus' purpose the entire time he was there, and likewise, will try to frustrate our purpose to keep us from reaping our harvest.

Nehemiah was faced with the same elephants, but determined that the work of rebuilding the wall had to be done.

One of the biggest challenges we will face in getting to harvest is making the determination that the situations in front of us will not deter us from finishing.

Shared Vision, Shared Task

Upon arriving in Jerusalem, Nehemiah examined the city to see all that needed to be done. Once he saw the extent of the damage, what Nehemiah did *not* do was change his vision or task based on what he saw. **Many times we start out with a vision or goal, a harvest in front of us, but change the harvest based on what we see.** *Maybe God wants me somewhere else, or doing something else, or maybe I wasn't really called to this...* Nehemiah serves as an example for us that even if the task seems impossible or better accomplished another way; we shouldn't stray from what we know God has given us.

And the devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me and I can give it to anyone I want to. So if you will worship me, it will all be yours – Luke 4:5-7

Satan tried to get Jesus to get to what seemed like the same result, only through different means. There are many examples where people forsook the path God had for them, thinking there was an easier way to get to the goal. Jesus however did not bow to the tactic of the enemy, and neither did Nehemiah. Not only did Nehemiah stick to his vision, he brought people in to share that vision and task in order to complete the work. Nehemiah knew the task - the harvest - was big, but he also knew that **with the help of the community**, it could be accomplished.

Rather than changing the vision God has given us, many times we can accomplish it by enlisting the help of others.

Nehemiah also did not call the people to a task that they had not already committed to. By opening up the opportunity, people were not just fulfilling Nehemiah's vision, but **reengaging with their own vision**. When I started a job at Digital Equipment Corporation, at lunch I would read my bible – not to prove anything or try to convert anyone – just because I wanted to read it. What happened though is that there were others who had the same vision, but were stifled in their fulfillment of it. When I opened the opportunity by my doing what I wanted to do, others began to do the same and live out their faith.

Side by Side

Eliashib the high priest and his fellow priests went to work and rebuilt the Sheep Gate... the men of Jericho built the adjoining section, and Zacchur son of Imri built next to them ... - Nehemiah 3:1-2

Verse by verse you see groups of people taking the task of “eating the elephant” in small chunks and accomplishing their piece. Each group worked alongside each other, focused on their piece, and in the process **saw how their piece fit into the whole.**

Jesus told a parable explaining the Kingdom of God:

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, “You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right”... - Matthew 20:1-4

The landowner knew before the day fully started that his pending harvest was going to require help. He therefore went out multiple times to find people to work in his field. **Even though there were multiple groups of people, there was only one work.**

So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more... - Matthew 20:10

Rather than see that they were part of a larger work, those that got to the fields first started to compare their work with the people who came later. Because of this, they thought that they deserved more, even though the owner told them that he would give what is **right**. For those that came early, their work in the field was not about producing something for the field owner, but about what they could personally get out of it. If we are not careful, we can fall into the same trap, viewing the harvest we are called into as our own little field, something to serve our purposes, and that my wage or reward is based on my level of effort, and not on what the owner wants to give.

The owner of the field took people who were hoping someone would give them work. They did not “work for the opportunity”, they just happened to be at the right place at the right time. They were given the gift of being able to participate with others in the work to produce a harvest, but didn’t view it this way.

Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness

Romans 4:4-5

Standing Out in the Crowd

The workers in the parable were not the only ones who felt special or different when it came to the work:

The next section was repaired by the men of Tekoa, but their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors – Nehemiah 3:5

Scripture doesn't say why the nobles of Tekoa wouldn't work, but it does point out that they were the only ones who did not. Rulers, high priests, perfume makers, men and women, sons and daughters all joined together in the work of rebuilding the wall, but the legacy of the nobles of Tekoa was that for some reason they decided the work was not for them. Yet there was enough work to do that the rest of the men of Tekoa repaired another section of the wall.

The work of the harvest is not positional. We all share in it equally, doing our piece for the whole of the harvest. One work... One community... One harvest.

Four Unnamed Friends

*Some men came, bringing to him a paralytic, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus and, after digging through it, lowered the mat the paralyzed man was lying on. **When Jesus saw their faith** he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." – Mark 2:3-5*

Obviously this man had a goal – a dream, desire, vision – a harvest he believed was in front of him. He had a problem though: he couldn't get there. Jesus was in town, and the man at some point knew that Jesus had the ability to heal him. Maybe not at first – maybe it wasn't until he was being let down in front of him. Maybe it was when the men convinced him that going on the roof was a good idea. One thing for sure is that it took four others to accomplish the task.

*When Jesus saw **their** faith*

We don't know who these men were. They were never named, and as far as we know this story is the sum total of their 15 minutes of fame. For these men their position was not important. At this point the only thing that was important was that harvest: getting the man to Jesus so he could receive what Jesus had to give. Jesus recognized the faith of the men when he saw their actions. The man was healed, and the men went right back into obscurity. They participated in a harvest not their own and not for their own recognition, yet Jesus recognized them for their faith. For the healed man, he could have had all the faith in the world, but he needed others to get him to his point of harvest.

You just might be the key to a person receiving their harvest

When we participate in community we are able to accomplish goals that are much larger than ourselves, and we can see how our piece fits into the whole.

Questions

- What goal, dream, vision or harvest has God given to you that you see as impossible to accomplish in your eyes?
 - Did the harvest start out as an “elephant”, or did it become that way through fatigue or frustration?
- Can you determine that nothing will stop you from accomplishing the task? If not, why?
- Have you changed the vision/harvest based on your circumstances or surroundings? Do you remember what the original vision/harvest was?
- Do you see yourself as engaged in a community that can help you get to your harvest?
- Can you see how your piece fits into the larger harvest for your small group? For MPVCC? For the kingdom of God?
- Are you comparing your work to others to determine what your wage should be?
- Are you approaching the harvest from a point of position, or are you will to do so in obscurity?

Study for Next Week

Deuteronomy 24:17-22; Luke 12:15-21

Meditate on God’s provision in harvest, and how we can be providers to others