

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series:** Mission, Fueled by a Vision

(Studies in the Old Testament book of Nehemiah)

## **Everybody, to the Wall!**

(Nehemiah 2:17b--3:32)

Study #5

### **Introduction:** First steps...

During these spring and summer Sundays, you and I are getting to explore one of the most exciting and less-known known stories in the Bible. The book of Nehemiah tells us how some willing workers restored the city of Jerusalem in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, to the glory of God.

In the weeks to come, we'll see plenty of exciting developments. But, everything prior to this point has been preparation for what happens today. Today, we come to the book's first, great, highpoint.

*The essential backstory...*

When we open to the story for today, Nehemiah is in Jerusalem. He's traveled from Susa, the winter capitol of the Persian Empire.<sup>1</sup>

He's been resourced by King Artaxerxes with everything he's going to need to complete major projects. He can cut timber for walls and buildings and he is protected by the Persian military.

He's done his reconnaissance work. He's walked around the city to see for himself how bad things are. He's seen the broken-down walls and gates and he's seen the depressed people.

He's called a public meeting with the citizens of Jerusalem. At the end of this meeting, he laid out a challenge.

***[2:17b]...Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem so that we will no longer be a reproach." [18a] I told them how the hand of my God had been favorable to me and also about the king's words which he had spoken to me.***

Notice.

He didn't say, "*You rebuild.*" He said, "***Let US rebuild.***" He's not an outsider looking in. He put himself *in* the predicament with the word "***WE***". He invited them to join him in the project of wall-building with "***come***", not "*go*".

I imagine that Nehemiah told stories from Susa about what happened in the court of King Artaxerxes. He assured them, "*God is in this thing!*"

We've got to remember that neither Nehemiah nor any of the people he was speaking to nor their parents or grandparents had ever seen Jerusalem in good shape, with the walls up.

But, having been assured of God's presence and having been challenged to God's work, the people responded.

***[2:18b]...“Let us arise and build.” So they put their hands to the good work.***

And just like that, captured by a vision of what could be, they looked to the future with excitement. They saw where God wanted them to go, and what God wanted them to do. There was energy.

Up to this point in our study of the book of Nehemiah, all has been preliminary. Today, the prelims are over. Today, the work begins.

We talk a lot around here about next steps. Here, we get to see some people taking first steps in doing what they want to do for God.

And, because we find what follows in the Bible, we believe that it contains vital truth for us.

<sup>1</sup> Susa is located in present-day Iran, not far from the Iran/Iraq border.

However, in some ways, as a preacher, coming to this chapter is somewhat daunting. It's kinda like coming to a genealogical list of names, where all preachers wonder, *"What do I do with this?!"*<sup>2</sup>

Nehemiah's first chapter set the stage for everything to come. There's a fantastic, moving, passionate prayer. The second chapter of Nehemiah is loaded with action! It is dynamic and there is movement.

But, at first glance, chapter three appears to be nothing but a list of hopelessly unpronounceable Jewish names.

Trust me. There is gold here. And all we're going to do for the next few minutes is make some observations about how the work got started. That's going to help us see how God spells "success" - then and now, there and here.

### An Overview of the Work

#### **Background: The physical setting of Jerusalem**

In Nehemiah's day, Jerusalem proper, the area that would be enclosed by walls, took up a little over three hundred acres. It's not all that much land.

A "section" of land, which Texans know is a one-mile square, is six hundred and forty acres. So, if the city of Jerusalem that was to be enclosed by a wall was laid out as a rectangle, it would be roughly one mile by one-half mile.

That would be about the distance from our church down Guilbeau to the HEB - and then a quarter of a mile on either side of Guilbeau.

"Greater Jerusalem" was larger. Lots of Jerusalem residents lived outside the border of the wall. But the walled city was not of great size.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> One of my Seminary professors, Dr. Howard Hendricks, used to say, *"You haven't heard me preach until you've heard me preach a genealogy!"* I have often wondered what Hendricks would have done with Nehemiah 3... ☺

<sup>3</sup> The Jerusalem of Nehemiah's day was smaller than in Solomon's time.

From this chapter, too, we learn that the city was divided into districts, much as we have areas of town here in San Antonio: The Pearl, Braun Station, Southtown, Monte Vista, King William.

Archaeological digs tell us that there were twelve gates<sup>4</sup> leading into and out of the city in Nehemiah's day. There were the Sheep,<sup>5</sup> Fish, Old, Broad, Furnace, Valley, Refuse, Fountain, Water, Horse, East, and Inspection gates.

Yes, it's important to learn some details about the city's layout. But the chapter is primarily concerned with the workers and the work.

First, notice that the workers are named.

#### **The Workers had NAMES**

Some of the Bible commentaries I've read about Nehemiah pay a lot of attention to the meaning of the Jewish names of the workers.

I don't. I don't think that the Hebrew meaning of this or that worker's name was important. The important thing here is not what the names mean. The important thing is that there are names.

Nehemiah could have shortened this chapter a lot with a Readers Digest summary, *"And a whole bunch of people worked on the walls and the gates, and they got the job done."*

He didn't do that.

He names **Eliashib** and **Zaccur** and **Hassenaah** and **Meremoth** and **Meshullam** and **Joiada** and **Melatiah** and **Jadon** and **Uzziel**.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> One commentator takes the gates and their supposed significance to the point of silliness. He writes, "The Fish Gate stands for Jesus' call to become fishers of men; the Refuse Gate stands for the need for spiritual cleansing; the Horse Gate stands for spiritual warfare" This is neither helpful nor necessary. The gates certainly had significance, but there is no reason to manufacture a "spiritual" significance.

<sup>5</sup> Jesus walked through the Sheep Gate on the night of His arrest both going to and from Gethsemane. This does serve as a striking bit of symbolism, as He served as the sacrificial Lamb of God.

<sup>6</sup> At the same time, we must accept that this is not an exhaustive list of workers.

To the IRS, I am a dollar figure; to the Census Bureau, a demographic data point; to REI and to HEB, a credit card number.

With God, every matter is intensely personal. First-name basis.

The writers of the New Testament named people. So, we know **Timothy** and **Titus** and **Barnabas** and **Silas**. We know about **Phoebe** and **Priscilla** and **Aquila** and **Mary** and **Andronicus** and **Aristarchus** and **Luke** and **Rufus** and **John Mark** and **Philemon** and **Damaris** and **Lydia** - and so many more.

In the church and in the work of Jesus, today, you are not a cog in a wheel. You are a unique creation of God, with a name. You count. You matter. Your work matters.

In addition to having names, these workers, for the most part, had jobs.

### **The Workers had DAY JOBS**

Some who worked on the walls were religious professionals like the High Priest, the regular priests, and the Levites (vv. 1, 22, 26). Others were tradesmen. But among the workers were also perfumers (v. 8), merchants (v. 32), and goldsmiths (v. 31).

Some were government officials and bureaucrats who ruled over cities and half districts and whole districts.

Some of the construction crews consisted of whole families who built together - men, women and children.

These people were busy with their lives, making a living, raising families, tending gardens that fed them. They were - like you - up to their eyeballs with things to do.<sup>7</sup>

Becoming involved in building the wall meant putting important things on hold. It meant sacrifice. It meant risk.

And notice a couple more things about the workforce.

First, in addition to those who lived in Jerusalem, some workers came from neighboring cities to help rebuild the walls. They left their homes elsewhere in Israel and traveled to Jerusalem to help. And second, as I have thumbed through the chapter, I count forty-two separate work crews.

These two items highlight the logistical challenges that would have been involved in restoring the wall.

- Where did the commuters live during the time of construction?
- How did the commuters get along with the residents of Jerusalem?
- How do you get forty-two work crews to work in harmony?
- How do you ensure consistent quality of work with forty-two work teams? (I assume some disparity in the workers' abilities)

These and other issues had to be worked through. The fact that they were "worked through" shows administrative genius, creativity, flexibility - and resolute single-mindedness on the part of the workers.

One thing is clear. No matter what a person's regular work was, if he or she wanted to work on the wall, they got to work on the wall.

I also noticed, in looking through chapter 3, that not everybody in Jerusalem wanted to work. All were invited, but not all participated.

### **Some "workers" DIDN'T work (3:5)**

*Non-workers singled out*

**[3:5] Moreover, next to [Zadok] (v. 4) the Tekoites made repairs, but their nobles did not support the work of their masters.**

We're never told why these nobles from Tekoa did not support the work? Did they think the work was beneath them? Were they hopeless that the project could actually be finished?

<sup>7</sup> In agrarian societies (which 5<sup>th</sup> century BC Palestine certainly was), while people may have worked trades, they also all would have tended subsistence gardens that had to be worked, or the family didn't eat.

Whatever the reasons might have been, you've got to feel sorry for them. Pity the Tekoite nobles. By not working they lost out, big time. Think of what the non-workers lost.

- They lost the chance to learn something about wall building.
- They lost the camaraderie that comes from working with others on a meaningful project.
- They missed the joy of seeing God grant success to their labors.
- They lost the chance to participate in Jerusalem's glorious future.

It is always a loss to any worker who refuses to engage in God's work. But notice this, too. The work went on.

*The work goes on*

Nehemiah and the people didn't allow the reticent Tekoite nobles to deter them from their task. As far as I can tell, they spent no energy trying to get these sideline-sitting nobles to get in the game.

It would have been nice to have had the Tekoite nobles working, and their absence DID make the work harder for everyone else. But the shirkers didn't stop the workers!

*"You don't want to work? OK. Whatever. But would you please get out of the way so that Meshullam over there can hand me another brick!"*

I wonder if the Tekoite nobles' non-involvement is mentioned to remind us that there are always going to be those who don't put their hands to the good work.

Did Nehemiah tell us about them to encourage us to not let the "Tekoite nobles" stand in the way of progress in God's work?

Did they make it into the record of the Bible to warn each of us to not become Tekoite nobles, because if we do, WE are the biggest loser?

In most settings, ask me if I'd like to have my name recorded in the Bible and I'll say, "You bet!" But not like this.

I wouldn't want to be recorded for all time for being someone who did NOT work.

But the fact that the Tekoite nobles are recorded along with the names of those who were active, tells us that God notices when we are involved in His work and He notices when we are not.

The Tekoite nobles serve as lowlights in the rebuilding effort. But there were also some beacons who shone extra bright.

### **Some Workers EXCELLED! (3:20)**

Some of the people worked at more than one place on the wall. They did "double duty."

Among these were a man named **Meremoth** (vv. 4, 21), another guy named **Meshullam** (vv. 4, 30), and **the people from Tekoa** (vv. 5, 27).

Wow! The Tekoite *people* received no support from their rulers, but they still made a greater than normal contribution to the work.

Here's another hero who surfaces in this chapter.

***[3:20] After him Baruch the son of Zabbai ZEALOUSLY repaired another section, from the Angle to the doorway of the house of Eliashib the high priest.***

I'm impressed with the zeal and the high energy associated with the entire project. But here's one man whose zeal stands out from all the rest.

### **Summary:**

So, most of the Jews in Jerusalem worked. Some, for whatever reason, didn't work. And some worked more than others. That sounds like most projects I've been involved with.

But this project is of special interest to us, because this project is about the work of God. And the reason we're studying Nehemiah is because we want to push God's work forward today.

It is important that we see, not only THAT the work got done, but HOW it got done. So, having made a few observations, we're going to keep learning as we watch them attack the work.

I'm going to take two swings at Nehemiah's third chapter. We're here today and we'll be here again next Sunday.

For both the remainder of today and next Sunday, we're going to dig deep into some strategy that governed the work in Jerusalem and see how it applies to today. We'll watch and learn and be inspired.

Following the movement of this chapter is to travel around the city counterclockwise. Nehemiah records the rebuilding of the wall, gate by gate by gate, section of the wall by section of the wall.

Starting at the beginning of the narrative, we find the high priest working with his brothers the priests. We notice, first, *where* they are working.

### **Strategic Work Assignments**

#### **Serving Where Your Heart is Ensures Quality (3:1)**

***[1] Then Eliashib the high priest arose with his brothers the priests and built the Sheep Gate; they consecrated it and hung its doors. They consecrated the wall to the Tower of the Hundred and the Tower of Hananel.***

In Israel, the priests were responsible for the sacrifices that were offered, daily, in the recently rebuilt temple.

Every day, the priests would go out to the pastures where the sheep were grazing, buy sheep, and bring them to the temple.

And what gate would they pass through on their way from the pasture to the temple? The Sheep Gate.

If there was any gate in the whole city that the priests would be concerned about - the quality of its construction, its beauty, its function - it was the Sheep Gate.

There was no place the priests would have rather worked than at the Sheep Gate. And the fact that the priests were so concerned about the Sheep Gate ensured that it would be built right. Nehemiah assigned them to build where their hearts were already stirred.

Brilliant. Generally, when people are serving in areas they care deeply about, the work goes forward, it gets done right, and it gets done right now.

So, dream with me.

The wall around Jerusalem was the work of God in Nehemiah's day. You and I haven't been given a wall to build. But we have been given a work to do. We have a Great Commission to fulfill. That is our "wall". And you have a place on the wall.

If you could do anything to serve King Jesus, if you could be positioned at any place on the Great Commission wall, where would it be? Here at church, in your neighborhood, in your home, in the community, what is your "Sheep Gate" service?

You don't have to have a quick and ready answer. But this, at one level, is the question above all questions when it comes to your service to Jesus.

Answering the question - "*Where do you care?*" - is vital both for your spiritual welfare and for the work, because we serve best when we serve where we care.

Give that question serious thought. Sooner rather than later.

OK, back to Nehemiah 3, again. We keep looking and we see some "more of the same."

Listen as I read and see if you don't pick up on a theme.

#### **HOME Assignment!**

***[3:10] Next to them Jedaiah the son of Harumaph made repairs opposite his house...***

**[3:23] After them Benjamin and Hasshub carried out repairs in front of their house. After them Azariah the son of Maaseiah, son of Ananiah, carried out repairs beside his house...**

**[3:28] Above the Horse Gate the priests carried out repairs, each in front of his house.**

**[3:29] After them Zadok the son of Immer carried out repairs in front of his house...**

**[30]...After him Meshullam the son of Berechiah carried out repairs in front of his own quarters.<sup>8</sup>**

*Proximity fosters “want-to” motivation*

Many of the work teams built right beside their homes. No commuting. Just roll out of bed in the morning and start to work. It was convenient.

Where it was possible, the Jews were working where it made sense **FOR THEM**, the builders.

Imagine that. Working for the glory of God where it is convenient. If I’m Nehemiah, I’m not making a case for laziness. I’m just saying, *“Let’s not make building this wall any harder than it has to be.”*

Not everybody could work on the portion of the wall beside their home. Some were terribly inconvenienced.

But if the wall is broken down right in front of your house, build there. Bloom where you’re planted. Serve where you are.

We could put this in 2018 terms by saying that regardless where else you might be on the wall of serving Jesus, you spend time at home. So, serve Him there. Point your roommates to Jesus. Encourage your family in the faith.

You already spend tons of time at work. Leverage those hours when you are on the job to build into others’ lives for Jesus’ sake. Your work life is a real important part of the 2018 wall.

And there is another thing to notice when we see these Jews working on the part of the wall in front of their homes. There was vested interest.

*Vested interest is a force multiplier*

Quality control was guaranteed when a family built the wall in front of their house. They would want the wall in front of their house to be strong because that part of the wall would protect their loved ones against an attack.

When you’re building to protect the people you love, you make sure that the wall is as stout as you can make it, that the bricks fit together snugly, that the mortar is strong, that the hinges holding the gates in place are tight.

It made sense for people to serve that part of the wall that protected loved ones. And that is a solid principle to put in place for us, today, who serve in Jesus’ Name. Serve those we love; serve those for whom we have a heart.

You love babies? There are places to serve babies here, and there are crisis pregnancy centers that serve babies and their mothers throughout the city.

Or, are you especially concerned...

...for the addicted?	...the disabled?
...the depressed?	...the abused?
...the poor?	...children?
...teens?	...college-aged?
...the homeless?	...the immigrant seeking legal status?
...the international living right here in San Antonio?	

Are there ministries at Northwest that are vitally connected to the well-being of people you love? Is there something in your past that has especially sensitized you to the needs of certain people and groups?

That sensitivity and passion may well indicate where you would best fit on the wall. Let’s call it “want-to” motivation.

<sup>8</sup> Archaeologists have found that at least one point in the Nehemiah's Wall (probably the broad wall, v. 8) was as much as twenty-two feet thick. Mostly, though, the wall was in the realm of eight feet thick.

## **“Want-To” Motivation**

### **Standard Operating Procedure**

“Want-to” motivation played out in Jerusalem in that people worked on the wall where they had good reason to want to build.

Now, did everybody get to build where they wanted to build? Probably not.

I can picture Nehemiah telling someone, *“Stop complaining, Levi. SOMEBODY has to work by the Refuse Gate.”*

There be those times when you and I are going to step up to the plate and serve Jesus out of our comfort zone - even out of our desire zone - because there is a need.

But I believe that “want-to” motivation is the normal pattern by which God moves His work forward.

### **Nehemiah Wasn’t “Assigned”**

Step back a few steps and think with me about why Nehemiah was in Jerusalem.

Based on what we have in the Bible, God never told Nehemiah to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem.

What happened was simply that a man who loved God was made aware of a great need and was then possessed by a passion to meet that need.

Restoring Jerusalem’s wall was something He wanted to do. God used Nehemiah’s “want-to” to get the job done.

Knowing that he had been allowed to come to Jerusalem to work on the wall because he wanted to, he honored the workers by assigning them work on the wall at places where they wanted to build.

Wherever possible, he allowed their hearts and passions to dictate where they built. And I think that’s a marvelous way to organize our thinking about serving Jesus today.

In Nehemiah’s day, everyone was invited to join in the work. Not everybody did (remember those Tekoite nobles...), but all whose hearts stirred them to work, got to work.

They did different jobs and worked at different sites, but they all contributed to the work of God in their day of building the wall.

Today, Jesus’ work is expansive, and it is multi-faceted. There are hundreds of ways in which we might serve Jesus today. And all our service to Jesus is summed up in the Great Commission of Matthew 28. *“Go. Make disciples of all the nations.”*

The way we say it around here is:  
*“We help you take next steps with Jesus so that you can help others take next steps with Jesus.”*

So, what is your next step?

Or, in Nehemiah-ese, on what part of the way do you want to work?

### **What do YOU Want to do?**

A few years ago, a book for and about men by John Eldridge was all the rage - and for good reason. [Wild at Heart](#) is a good book.

I personally enjoyed it and have recommended it to many men through the years (I’ve talked with some women who really enjoyed it, too - but don’t tell John).

Near the end of the book, Eldridge urges his readers to NOT ask, *“What does the world need now?”* to discover where they should invest their energies.

Instead, he pleads with each of his readers to ask, *“As a redeemed man (and we would add, “or woman), what do I WANT to do for my world, for my Savior?”*

He is saying that the world needs Christians who are doing what they have always dreamed they would do for God, Christians who are living from their hearts.

I think he's right.

The workers in Nehemiah heard the challenge. Their response, ***"Let us arise and build"*** could not have been given in a monotone.

It had to have been given with a shout. Imagine the scene and you'll see smiles and determination and lots of "want-to". You'll hear volume and passion.

Their response on that day tells us that those who serve best serve enthusiastically, and those who serve enthusiastically are those who are doing exactly what they have always wanted to do.

Nehemiah's invitation to us is to view the wreckage. Look at the broken-down walls around you. See the need.

And then, listen to your heart's passion.

You have energy and time and money and talents and resources. Where do you want to invest them in your next steps? To help others take next steps? To press Jesus into the world? To meet needs in Jesus' Name?

That's your ***"Go."***