

## **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)

## **When the Mission's ACCOMPLISHED!** Study #9

(Nehemiah 6:5-16)

### **Introduction: Breaking the tape...**

Finishing a marathon is a victory. You don't have to win the race, to win. Running 26.1 miles counts as a triumph. Forget the podium.

And thousands of San Antonio High School and college students will walk across a stage and receive a diploma this year. That walk is a victory. Graduating *summa cum laude* isn't required. "Thank You, Lordy" is enough.

Some tasks are so great that simple completion, crossing the finish line, is sweet enough.

Over the years, I have set lots of goals for myself. Some of them even lofty goals. I've checked off a few of them as "done" and failed at more than a few others. Some are still in process.

But I've savored every small or large victory, and I'll bet you have, too, whether it involved learning Spanish or guitar, certification in a profession, kicking a bad habit, closing a big deal, or creating a thing of beauty at home. Mission: Accomplished is sweet.

We know the delight it is to finish something, great or not. So, we understand how the Jews of Jerusalem felt when they came to the end of the wall-building work they had undertaken in the days of Nehemiah.

They knew what they wanted to do for God. They "put their hands to the good work" and they did it.

That wall, built by priests and Levites, perfumers and goldsmiths, may not have been one of the great wonders of the ancient world. But it was finished. Today, we rejoice with those builders at the completion of the wall.

*A brief review of Nehemiah...*

We began our study of this Old Testament book back in early April. And to review...

Nehemiah, a Jew, was serving as the cupbearer to Artaxerxes, king of Persia, in the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, BC.

Nehemiah's brother, Hanani, came visiting and reported that Jerusalem was in pitiful shape. This was one hundred and forty years after it had been destroyed by the Babylonians.<sup>1</sup>

For a century and a half Jerusalem had been littered with rubble. Its gates and walls were ruined, and the people were living in reproach.

Of course, Nehemiah was devastated by this report. He grieved the condition of Israel's once-great capital. But, finally, after months of prayer and fasting, one day he got the chance to be part of the solution to the problem.

Nehemiah asked permission from the king to go to Jerusalem to restore it - and Artaxerxes said, "Yes!"

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<sup>1</sup> Which had taken place in 586 BC. Nehemiah traveled to Jerusalem in the mid 440's BC.

The book then goes on to trace Nehemiah's travels to Jerusalem, the work of rebuilding of the walls and of bringing the city back to spiritual health.

It is a great story. Amazingly, less than a year after Hanani had delivered the bad news about the state of Jerusalem, we come to the end of the part of the story concerned with construction.

Now the book's only half done and there's lots more to see here. But the walls and the gates are restored.<sup>2</sup>

Over the last two Sundays (chapters 4 and 5), we've focused on roadblocks to the wall-building.

There was opposition from enemies that was overcome with prayer and a commitment to stand together and keep building.<sup>3</sup>

And then, there was an internal logjam that caused an actual work stoppage. That logjam was removed when injustice ceased, and love flowed between the workers, allowing them to get back to doing what was on their hearts to do for God.

Today, the wall gets finished.

But before we watch the Jews break the tape at the finish line, we'll briefly watch the final, desperate attempts of the enemies to derail the work.

These enemies were, if nothing else, persistent. Having failed at the first three attempts to derail the workers, they decided to try again.

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<sup>2</sup> Nehemiah had first learned that the people living there were in distress, the walls around the city were in ruins and that its gates were burned with fire in the 20th year of the reign of King Artaxerxes. Following this discovery, starting around December, Nehemiah prayed (see chapter 1) for four solid months while continuing to serve as the king's cupbearer. Following those four months of prayer, and having received permission to travel to Jerusalem, he arrived, probably in late June. Thus, work on the wall began in the middle of the Jewish month of Ab (our July) and continued during a Palestinian famine, in the heat of the summer.

<sup>3</sup> This is resistance from the main enemies of the Jews - Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem - who used threats and intimidation to get the Jews to quit the work.

This time, they sent a letter. They had already sent four - so clearly, creativity was not their strong suit.

But this time the letter was not sealed in a diplomatic pouch inviting Nehemiah to an important sounding meeting. This time it was an open letter. Anyone could read it. And this letter contained a dangerous accusation.

### **Outside Interference (continued) (6:5-14)**

#### **When Accused (6:5-9)**

*The Message: "We'll accuse you and discredit you." (vv. 5-7)*

***[5] Then Sanballat sent his servant to me in the same manner a fifth time with an open letter in his hand. [6] In it was written, "It is reported among the nations, and Gashmu (i.e. - Geshem) says, that you and the Jews are planning to rebel; therefore you are rebuilding the wall. And you are to be their king, according to these reports. [7] You have also appointed prophets to proclaim in Jerusalem concerning you, 'A king is in Judah!' And now it will be reported to the king according to these reports. So come now, let us take counsel together."***

The opposition is making the very serious charge that *Governor* Nehemiah is secretly scheming to become *King* Nehemiah.

If King Artaxerxes heard this report and believed it, Nehemiah would have been charged with treason and put to death.

So, he listened as Sanballat's servant read him the accusing letter - and he calmly retreated to the safety of the truth.

*A retreat to the truth! (vv. 8-9)*

***[8] Then I sent a message to him saying, "Such things as you are saying have not been done, but you are inventing them in your own mind." [9] For all of them were trying to frighten us, thinking, 'They will become discouraged with the work and it will not be done.' "But now, O God, strengthen my hands!"***

Watch. Nehemiah didn't dignify the charges with an argument. He didn't beg Sanballat, *"Please, don't tell the king!"*

No, he denied the charge, prayed, and kept on working.

Now, does that mean that he wasn't troubled by the letter? No, I think that the accusation messed with his head. Else why pray, ***"Strengthen my hands!"***?

Nehemiah's hands were growing weary. He was getting close to discouragement. False accusations and constant attacks will do a number on anybody. And it might be that this charge that he was in it for self-advancement was just too much.

Maybe he was tempted to say, *"It's not worth it. I've crashed through enough barriers. I'm fading fast, growing weaker. I quit!"*

If you've ever been on the receiving end of a false accusation, you'll understand how Nehemiah's hands might have needed strengthening.

And, while I'm not a prophet, I will suggest that if you have gotten serious about serving Jesus and haven't, to this point, been accused of something falsely, it's probably going to come.<sup>4</sup>

- Somebody will misunderstand something you have said or done.
- Someone will attribute evil motives to your idea.
- Someone will make up something bad and untrue about you.<sup>5</sup>

On a congregational level, the more serious we get here as a church about carrying out the mission Jesus gave us, the more certain we can be that some will misunderstand us, accuse us of things that are not true, or question our motives.

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<sup>4</sup> See 2 Timothy 3:12, where Paul promises that those who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

<sup>5</sup> On a congregational level, the more serious we get here as a church about carrying out the mission Jesus gave us, the more certain we can be that some will misunderstand us, accuse us of things that are not true, or question our motives.

When the accusations fly we can learn so much from Nehemiah. He entrusted his reputation to God and kept his hands on the work.

Even better than Nehemiah, we can make Jesus our example.

When the Apostle Peter was writing to Christians who were routinely being falsely accused and hassled for their faith in the first century, he told them to imitate Jesus, who,

***[1 Peter 2:23]...while being reviled, did not revile in return; while suffering, uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously***

That's how to deal with false accusations.

But the enemies aren't finished. The work's getting close to "done" and they're not about to ease up. They want to stop the work and their final attack was aimed directly at Nehemiah.

### **When Schemed Against (6:10-14)**

*The Message: "We'll frighten you into compromising your integrity." (v. 10)*

***[10] When I entered the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, son of Mehetebel, who was confined at home, he said, 'Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and let us close the doors of the temple, for they are coming to kill you, and they are coming to kill you at night.'***

Shemaiah is playing the part of a good friend here. He's heard a rumor that ***"they"*** (the ever-present *"they"*) are out to get Nehemiah.

Shemaiah appears to have Nehemiah's best interests at heart.

*"Quick. Nehemiah, run with me to the temple!"* - and the temple does seem like a pretty safe place to flee to. Great advice, *"When in trouble, flee to the temple."*

But, Nehemiah was immediately uncomfortable with this plan.

*An inspired insight (vv. 11-12a)*

Refusing to play the coward's part! (v. 11)

***[11] But I said, "Should a man like me flee? And could one such as I go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in!"***

For one thing, running for his life would have been an affront to a Persian official. Persian governors don't run and hide.

For another, Nehemiah might have considered it beneath his dignity to sink to the level of fleeing from enemies. This gutsy man of God would have rather died with his boots on than flee.

But, while these might have factored into his hesitation to go with Shemaiah to the temple, there was something else going on here.

Refusing to play the pagan's part!

Among the nations that surrounded Israel in those days, it was accepted that places of worship were places of "sanctuary."

If you were guilty of a crime and were fast enough to run to a Philistine or Egyptian temple, you were safe. The temple was safe.

However, the Jews were forbidden to use the temple of God for safety's sake. In the Old Testament, we read this:

***[Exodus 21:14] If...a man acts presumptuously toward his neighbor, so as to kill him craftily, you are to take him even from My altar, that he may die.***<sup>6</sup>

In other words, the temple was not a place where a person could flee for safety in times of danger.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In fact, 1 Kings 1:50-53 is a direct application of Exodus 21, as it records the actions of King Solomon. He took a man named Adonijah from the altar itself rather than allow Adonijah to continue to find amnesty there. Adonijah certainly discovered that the temple was not a reliable place to seek safety!

Plus, Nehemiah was not a Levitical priest. And only priests were permitted to go where Shemaiah was suggesting they go.<sup>8</sup> At first blush we wondered if Nehemiah didn't like Shemaiah's plan because it offended his macho, swash-buckling style.

After some digging, though, we find that he didn't go to the temple with Shemaiah because to have done so would have been sinful.

***[12a] Then I perceived that surely God had not sent him...***

And how did Nehemiah perceive that God had not sent Shemaiah? Because Shemaiah was suggesting that he do something that was forbidden in the Bible.<sup>9</sup>

Do we need any more evidence that a growing, submissive relationship with God's Word is a great safeguard against sin? You'll have the same protection if you saturate your mind with the Bible's truths and commit to do what it says. God wants us, today, to be a people of the Book.

With that insight, that the invitation to go to the temple was an attempt to get him to sin, the whole scheme fell apart.

*A sinister suggestion (vv. 12b-14)*

***[12b] ...but he uttered his prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him.***

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<sup>7</sup> Rather than offer the temple as a place of safety, the Mosaic Law provided for "cities of refuge" for innocent people fleeing from an avenger who wanted to kill them for an alleged wrong.

<sup>8</sup> There were outer courts for both the tabernacle and temple that were places where the non-Levite could go. But the language Shemaiah uses here speaks of entering into the structure itself (not an outer, outside court) - and that would have been forbidden. Among the passages with this prohibition would be Numbers 1:50-51 and 17:13.

<sup>9</sup> Had Nehemiah not known those passages in Exodus and Numbers he might have unwittingly fled to the temple. Had he done so, he would have been guilty of sin against God AND he would have brought himself and the whole work of rebuilding the wall into reproach. Nehemiah was protected from sin because he was a person of the Book.

***[13] He was hired for this reason, that I might become frightened and act accordingly and sin, so that they might have an evil report in order that they could reproach me. [14] Remember, O my God, Tobiah and Sanballat according to these works of theirs, and also Noadiah the prophetess and the rest of the prophets who were trying to frighten me."***

In all the ploys they have tried, the enemies have known exactly what they were doing. And their ploys might have worked perfectly - except for one thing. The Jews remained faithful to God.

They hadn't considered that Nehemiah and the workers just might put their trust in the Lord when they were opposed. But, that is exactly what they did - and so the work never missed a beat.

- When the attack was dismissive mocking, *"You don't have what it takes to do what you want to do for God"* - THEY PRAYED.
- When the attack was a threatening, *"We won't let you do what you want to do for God"* - THEY PRAYED AND SET UP A GUARD FOR PROTECTION.
- When the attack was a distracting, *"Come to the plains of Ono for a meeting"* - Nehemiah said, "NO!" and KEPT TO THE TASK AT HAND.
- When the attack was an accusing, *"You're just rebuilding the walls so that you can become king"* - Nehemiah RETREATED TO THE TRUTH AND KEPT ON WORKING.
- And when the attack was a deceitful, *"We'll frighten you into compromising your integrity"* - Nehemiah FOUND PROTECTION IN OBEDIENCE TO THE WORD OF GOD.

And now, after weeks of trusting and praying and working and blood, sweat, and tears, the job is done.

### **Mission: Accomplished! (6:15-16)**

(at least, Phase One...)

### **The Wall is Done (v. 15)**

***[15] So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of the month Elul, in fifty-two days.***

That seems really fast to me. Does it seem fast to you?<sup>10</sup>

The city had been in ruins for a century and a half. The Bible says that it was rebuilt in a month and a half. How?

Well, by turns, opposition was ignored and then overcome while energized people rose to the occasion and gained victory over a dismal *status quo*.

That's what happened.

I think it's possible that what the Bible is telling us here is that when people's hearts are fully vested in doing what they want to do for God, it doesn't take that long to turn things around.

In Jerusalem, a group of merchants, priests and perfumers rebuilt a broken-down wall in fifty-two days.

Which sounds a lot like what was said of the first followers of Jesus in the first century, who, just a couple of decades after the start of the church, were accused of upsetting ***[Acts 17:6]... "the world."***

Fast forward twenty centuries. Might a similarly quick turnaround be possible today? Could it happen for you? For us? Hold on to that thought. I'll come back to it shortly.

The wall project is completed to the glory of God - and the conclusion of the wall re-building project affected more than the workers.

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<sup>10</sup> How was it built so quickly? First, remember that the work was primarily re-construction, and not new construction. So, most of the raw materials for building were there on the job site. Second, there were dangers all around, supplying lots of motivation to the workers to finish in a hurry. Third, archaeologists have found that the total length of the wall was roughly three miles all around. So, it is not as if they were building a wall around San Antonio. Fourth, (and a little embarrassing) recent excavations done on the old east wall have revealed that the construction was probably done rather hastily and sloppily. And fifth, the inhabitants of Jerusalem had help during the building from the residents of Jericho, Tekoa, Gibeon, and Mizpah (see chapter 3).

It also deeply impacted those who had opposed the project.

### **The Enemies Get the Point and God Gets the Credit! (v. 16)**

***[16] When all our enemies heard of it, and all the nations surrounding us saw it, they lost their confidence; for they recognized that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.***

At the beginning of the book, the people of Jerusalem were ***“in great distress and reproach”*** (1:3). Now, the enemy is defeated and deflated.

Yes, of course, the Jews worked hard on that wall all through the summer during a Palestinian famine while being opposed.

But, the opposition understood that this whole wall thing hadn't happened just because of the people's gung-ho attitude. All over their success were the fingerprints of God.

That, alone, explains the loss of the enemy's confidence. And THIS, my friends, is what we want to see in our day.

We want to see things happen that are so far beyond anything that could be expected from any of us or from all of us that when it is done, everyone will say, *“They did this with the help of their God!”*

Nehemiah might tell us that these kinds of things happen when we put our trust in God, pray, and rush to the wall.

### **Conclusion:**

Ecclesiastes 7:8 says, ***“The end of a matter is better than its beginning.”*** And the end of this matter is lip-smacking, mouth-watering, sweet-tasting VICTORY!

Imagine the feelings of *relief* and *joy* when that final rock was set in the wall and the last hinge was installed on the last gate.

The end of construction doesn't mark the end of the book. We're only half way through Nehemiah. We might even say that the fifty-two day point was the START of something big.

But, day fifty-two was definitely a day of celebration.

It took less than two months for the Jews of Jerusalem to rebuild the walls around the city and they did it by embracing the ethos, *“Everybody on the wall!”*

Today, our “wall” is Jesus' Great Commission. Each one of us has a mission from God to grow as a disciple and to make disciples; to take next steps with Jesus, and to help somebody else take their next steps with Jesus.

So, let me ask you, what has stirred in your heart since we began exploring Nehemiah's story back in early April?

What have you thought about, prayed about, and considered investing time, energy, and money in for Jesus?

What next steps have you taken, or do you dream of taking toward your place on the wall? Who is on the short or long list of people you'd like to help take a next step with Jesus?

Would you dare to dream, now, about what God might do in or through you, if you gave yourself to the pursuit of a “next step” life - for the next fifty-two days? Or, maybe, throughout summer, 2018?

By the way, that is very much what the men who will be coming together for the three-week workshop on Saturday, July 7, 14, and 21 will be doing. I'm really looking forward to that!

Think about the changes that could happen in some of your personal relationships.

- Could your family, a family that isn't hitting on all cylinders right now, a family that may have been through some tough times, start the rebuilding process, through repentance and forgiveness this summer?

- Could a friendship wrecked by misunderstanding be repaired with love and honesty, not sometime, but over the next few weeks?
- Could one street (yours?) or even a neighborhood (pick one: Village in the Woods, Hills and Dales, Braun Station) marked by isolation become a community thanks to your hospitality and caring?

In Nehemiah's day, the mess that was Jerusalem was restored by God's people as they rushed to the wall and became partners in a God-sized work over the course of seven and a half weeks.

There is wreckage and there are messes all around us. What God-sized things might God do today if we, here, were to trust, pray, and rush to the wall?

Might...

- ...people who have never known much about Jesus come to faith?
- ...broken families be restored?
- ...children be nurtured and turn to Jesus?
- ...youth ignite with holy fire for Christ?
- ...the unemployed find work?
- ...missionaries see Gospel breakthroughs as we give and pray?
- ...trafficked human beings be set free?
- ...babies be born, who might otherwise never see the light of day?
- ...addictions be broken?
- ...our experience of community here become transformational?
- ...a prayer revival begin here?

Might these things come about because you, having been touched by God, want to touch others for God?

I'm not asking *how* you would go about doing this great thing for God. *WHAT* always precedes *HOW*.

When God births a vision in someone's heart, there are always more questions than answers. Always obstacles. Always a lack of resources. Often there is little to go on other than gut-level, unquenchable, insatiable desire.

And the big "WHAT?" is, "*What is on your heart to do for God? What breaks your heart about the way things are? Into what need do you want to press Jesus' love and grace?*"

Today, you're receiving two simple bookmarks that could mark the beginning of something fresh and new for you.

One bookmark has three spaces for you to write down your "next steps" of faith and obedience. The other has five lines for you to write down the names of people you intend to pray for and help take their own "next steps" with Jesus.

I'm asking that you take these bookmarks home and that you take them seriously.

Prayerfully write down what your specific next steps will be. Write down the names of people or even groups of people you will pray for and serve in Jesus' Name.

And please don't keep what you've written to yourself. Share it with at least one other person.

And then look forward to a Sunday in mid-August (I know it's not fifty-two days...) when we celebrate together the "next step" victories God has given us.