

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)

On Giants' Shoulders

(Nehemiah 6:17--7:73)

Study #10

Introduction: The day after success...

In this life, we're never really *finished*. There's always a *next*.

Briana Herrera, Ellie Jenness, and Peter Sattler just graduated from High School. We ate cake in their honor last Sunday. Now, more education awaits. And, as they well know, graduation from college will bring work and bill-paying, increased responsibilities and extreme adulting.

Throughout our lives, every mountain-top we reach leads to more summits. Climbs lead to plateaus that lead to steeper climbs. The day after every victory brings new challenges, new obstacles.

And we learn this lesson early. Grant Harrison, who just recently graduated from kindergarten, doesn't get to retire. First grade is just around the corner.

So it was twenty-five centuries ago, about 440 BC, in Nehemiah's Jerusalem.

The walls and the gates were in place at the end of fifty-two days of fevered construction. But that didn't mean the WORK was finished.

And today, we watch the CONTINUING work of the Jews as we return to Nehemiah's story.

Review of Nehemiah

The book of Nehemiah traces the man's life and times. He was the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes in Susa, Persia. He moved to Jerusalem to lead the effort to rebuild that city's broken-down walls and to restore its broken-down spiritual life.

It is an amazing story. Less than a year after Nehemiah's brother, Hanani, reported that the wall was broken down,¹ that the city was in ruins, and that the people were in reproach, we read this:

[15] So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of the month Elul, in fifty-two days.² [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.

Yes, of course the Jews had worked hard.

But the enemies of this project understood that God was behind it all. They saw that they were not just fighting Nehemiah and a bunch

¹ Nehemiah had first learned (1:1) that the people living in Jerusalem 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. (Mid 440's BC) Following this discovery, and beginning in December, Nehemiah committed to a season of prayer and fasting on behalf of the Jews there. At the end of that season, (our March/April) standing before the most powerful ruler in the world, Artaxerxes of the Persian Empire, Nehemiah asked for and received permission to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the city's walls. Work on the wall began in the middle of the Jewish month of Ab (our July). Fifty-four days later, the work was finished in the middle of a Palestinian famine, in the simmering heat of the summer.

² How was it built so quickly? First, the work was primarily reconstruction, and not new construction, meaning that most of the raw materials for building were there on the job site. Second, there were dangers all around, supplying lots and lots of motivation to the workers to work fast. Third, the total length of the wall was probably no more than three miles all around; nothing like building a wall around San Antonio. Fourth, recent excavations done on the old East Wall have revealed that the construction was probably done rather sloppily. Fifth, lots of non-Jerusalem residents pitched in to help. (see chapter 3)

of malcontent Jews. God's fingerprints were all over their defeat and the Jews' victory.

In ruins for a century and a half, the city walls were rebuilt in a month and a half by a rag-tag group of merchants and priests, goldsmiths and perfumers.

This story from the Bible tells that when the hearts of God's people are in it, it just doesn't take that long to turn things around.

Doing what is on your heart to do for God...

When your heart is fully vested in doing what you want to do for God, and you pray and give yourself to doing this thing for Jesus, God will show up and do the kinds of things that only He can do.

I want you to know that I am excited about what we're going to see in the Bible today. Nehemiah is moving us toward a powerful moment.

This morning we are going to discover a place to turn to find the courage that will enable us to do what is on our hearts to do for God, to rush to the wall, to be "on mission" for Jesus' Great Commission, to take that series of next steps for Jesus and to help others take those next steps, too.

The main thing I want to explore with you this morning revolves around what we read in Nehemiah 7:4.

But before we get there, just like high school graduates will find come September, the work continues even after it's finished.

Right after we read about the completion of the wall, we learn about weak spots that need strengthening. Not weak spots in the building. Weak spots in the builders.

The (finished) Work Continues (6:17--7:4)

Foreshadowing - Trouble Ahead! (6:17-19)

Remember Tobiah (v. 17)

[17] Also in those days many letters went from the nobles of Judah to Tobiah, and Tobiah's letters came to them.

We've heard Tobiah's name before.

Tobiah (the Ammonite³) had been an enemy of the work from the very beginning. Tobiah...
...mocked the Jews when he found out that they intended to rebuild the walls (2:19);
...mocked their first wall-building efforts (4:4);
...hired Shemaiah to incite Nehemiah to sin by getting him to flee to the temple for safety. (6:12)

This Tobiah was among the most dangerous of the Jews' enemies and one of the most serious opponents to the work of God.

And we now discover that prominent Jews in Jerusalem were bound to Tobiah by damaging, entangling relationships.

Unequally yoked (vv. 18-19)

[18] For many in Judah were bound by oath to him because he was the son-in-law of Shecaniah the son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah. [19] Moreover, they were speaking about his good deeds in my presence and reported my words to him. Then Tobiah sent letters to frighten me.

³ The Ammonites were ethnically related to the Jews, as the father of the tribe was Abraham's nephew, Lot, and you can read the very sordid story of Ammon's birth in Genesis 19. Because of their near relation to Abraham, the Jews were ordered to treat the Ammonites kindly. (Deuteronomy 2) But, the Ammonites gave God cause to rescind that command when they allied themselves with the false prophet, Balaam. (Numbers 23) At that point, a curse was placed on the Ammonites. From then on, they fought against Israel (see Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, and 1 & 2 Kings) at every opportunity. In 1 Kings 11, we discover that King Solomon married some Ammonite women, who introduced him to the practice of child sacrifice. Also, throughout the period of the prophets (especially Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, and Zephaniah), the Ammonites were roundly condemned.

So, Tobiah and his family have intermarried with the Jewish nobility. And, without question, having Tobiah for a father-in-law, son-in-law, or brother-in-law would have made for awkward holiday family meals.

Tobiah was opposed to the work of God in the city, and every Jew caught in his circle of influence would have been conflicted. There were competing loyalties to the work and to this anti-Jewish in-law.

Those who were related to Tobiah were telling Nehemiah, *“That Tobiah, what a great guy!”*

To use a perfectly “fit” word, these nobles who were now family with Tobiah were being hypocritical.

To make themselves acceptable to Nehemiah, they presented themselves as cheerleaders for the wall-building project while at the same time they were befriendng the project’s most vocal enemy.⁴

This development is very troubling. And we even wonder why it’s included in the book.

We thought that the point of the story Nehemiah was telling was to recount how the wall got rebuilt. Well, it turns out that’s only part of the point.

If that had been the whole point, stopping the book at Nehemiah 6:16 would have made sense.

End of the work. End of the book, with a beautiful picture of God’s people enjoying a perfect victory, basking in success.

But, Nehemiah was out to tell a bigger story about walls AND God AND spiritual health AND revival. So, he had to include the details of Tobiah’s presence and continuing influence in Jerusalem.

Got victory? Great! Be watchful...

⁴ Remember that Ezra the scribe had forbidden intermarriage between the Ammonites and the Israelites once they had come back from captivity to inhabit the land of Palestine. (see Ezra 9 and 10)

In literary terms, Nehemiah is employing a device known as *foreshadowing*.

When a writer wants to warn the reader of a conflict that is to come later, he will insert a scene in his book that prompts the reader to think, *“Uh oh. Trouble’s coming!”*

That is what Nehemiah is doing here. He is warning us. Tobiah is soon going to be a source of trouble (as we’ll see in chapter 13).

But I want to be clear that this bit of foreshadowing isn’t just here to warn Nehemiah about Tobiah. It’s here to warn us that there’s trouble ahead whenever we undertake a major effort for the Lord.

If you get serious about investing your money to fund advances for the Gospel, or if you become an evangelizing, Jesus-sharing, witnessing FORCE, expect trouble.

If we grow in our capacity to serve people who are battling addictions, get better at welcoming those who are ethnically, culturally, economically, politically diverse, and loving boldly while exposing darkness, trouble’s coming.

To be forewarned is to be forearmed. But to be forewarned is **NOT** an invitation to retreat.

It is an invitation to move to the wall with eyes wide open to the fact that here, the work is never, done, done. The wall’s up? Great. Watch out.

And one more thing. Nehemiah’s post-completion, continuing work also involves setting the city’s infrastructure up for long term success.

Consolidating Gains (7:1-3)

Worship leaders for the city (v. 1)

[7:1] Now when the wall was rebuilt and I had set up the doors, and the gatekeepers and the singers and the Levites were appointed

Nehemiah put in place those who would lead in community worship. This wasn't hard for him to make that happen. He was the governor. He simply appointed the right people.

Then, he filled civic leadership posts with quality people.

Godly leaders for the city (v. 2)

[2] then I put Hanani my brother, and Hananiah the commander of the fortress, in charge of Jerusalem, for he was a faithful man and feared God more than many.

Hanani was the one who had told Nehemiah about the mess Jerusalem was in at the beginning of the book. He was a godly man who could be trusted to lead well.

And Hanani was to share leadership with another man, Hananiah. Both possessed unimpeachable character (note *"faithful"*) and were devoted to the Lord. They were sharp men, the kind of people you want leading in government.

Nehemiah also put measures in place to ensure safety in the city.

Protection for the city (v. 3)

[3] Then I said to them, "Do not let the gates of Jerusalem be opened until the sun is hot, and while they are standing guard, let them shut and bolt the doors. Also appoint guards from the inhabitants of Jerusalem, each at his post, and each in front of his own house."

With the recent restoration of the city, we're not surprised that the merchants would want to open the gates as soon as it was light to take advantage of daytime hours for increased sales.

Nehemiah says, *"Not so fast! Wait until mid-morning. Wait until guards are in place, both for businesses and for personal residences."*

Attacks from enemies are expected. Constant vigilance is the price of continued liberty, and of hoped for revival.

So, worship leaders are in place. Wise and godly leadership for the city. Safety precautions are in place. Does that mean everything is "all good" in Jerusalem?

Well, not exactly. There is still this one little problem that needs some attention.

Summary: Status Report on the City (v. 4)

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

Overcrowding is a problem. Ask anybody who's ever been to Mexico City or LA or to Tokyo. But, as people from Detroit and Cincinnati know, undercrowding is a problem, too.

The one thing that every great, world-class city must have is people. And the one thing that Jerusalem was lacking was - people.

So, how do you fix the problem of UNDERpopulation? How do you interest people who aren't motivated to move, to move?

Now we get to watch Nehemiah's brilliant move.
Those Who (previously) Moved to Jerusalem (7:5-73)

Arranging the People by Families (v. 5-6)

[5] Then my God put it into my heart⁵ to assemble the nobles, the officials and the people to be enrolled by genealogies. Then I found the book of the genealogy of those who came up first in which I found the following record: [6] These are the people of the province who came up from the captivity of the exiles whom

⁵ This wasn't Nehemiah's idea. It was God who laid the idea on Nehemiah's heart.

Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away, and who returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his city...

Nehemiah called an assembly of the Jews - both residents and non-residents of Jerusalem - got them all together in the city, and arranged them according to their family trees.

He's gathering them for worship, a time of worship that we'll see next Sunday. But here, he's just got them in front of him. Standing. Waiting. Expecting.

Nehemiah has dredged up a genealogical record that had been written just a few years earlier by Ezra. What we read here in Nehemiah 7 is also found in Ezra, chapter 2. I'm confident that Nehemiah read this genealogy out loud to his audience.

Listing Ancestors (vv. 7-7)

I have decided to NOT read verses 6-73 out loud (you can rejoice now).

But, you and I should know what this list of mostly unpronounceable Jewish names is all about or we won't understand why it was included, why including it was so brilliant, or what its impact was.

If you will simply scan the list, you will notice that it is divided into six sections.

An outline of the list

- Vv. 7-38 list the heads of households, either by name or location;
- Vv. 39-45 list the priests and Levites;
- Vv. 46-60 list the (non-Levitical) temple servants and the sons of Solomon's servants (evidently a semi-official group of royal servants);
- Vv. 61-65 record the names of those who could not prove their ancestry;
- Vv. 66-69 record the number of domesticated animals that came back from Babylon to Jerusalem;

- Vv. 70-72 tell us how much money was collected from the people for the support of the work of rebuilding the city.

Simply recounting the "highlights" of the list may have been tedious enough for you, so I'm sure that you are glad that I have not read the whole passage. But, remember, verses 7-73 are in the Bible.

And, while this might not appear to be as **inspiring** as some other sections of the Bible, it is just as **inspired**.

Nehemiah chose to expose this list of people's names to the people of his day, and he decided to include the list in his book for a reason. God knew that in the years following 440 BC, His people would study Nehemiah's book and story. He made sure that this list was included for our benefit, too.

So, for what reason were these names included? Here goes...

The people behind the names on the list

When the Babylonians defeated Israel and destroyed Jerusalem (586 BC), they deported many of the Jews and forced them to move away from the holy land.

Seventy years after that destruction and scattering, many of the displaced Jews returned to Jerusalem led by a man named Zerubbabel.

In your Bible, the book located right before Nehemiah, Ezra, we come across a listing of those who came back to Jerusalem from Babylon/Persia.

This is the list that Nehemiah repeats in our passage for today.⁶

That's right. These verses that we are trying to avoid reading contain the names of those who returned from well-established lives in Babylon and Persia to repopulate and re-establish Jerusalem.

⁶ The two lists are virtually identical except for a few changes in the spellings of some of the names.

Why does Nehemiah repeat the list? Well, consider what those Jews did who came back to Jerusalem with Zerubbabel.

They had lived away from Israel long enough to have developed established identities in Persia.

Today, seventy years is enough time for a family to consider themselves Texans. In 500 BC it was probably long enough for a family to consider themselves Persians. Still Jewish in faith, but Persian in culture. They had probably taken the advice of the prophet Jeremiah and settled down there, bought houses, planted gardens, and prospered.

And what was Jerusalem like in the days of that return?

During those seventy years following its destruction, Jerusalem went from terrible to worse. It was already a wrecked city with a decimated population. All the leaders were gone. There was no effort to rebuild and no resources to maintain infrastructure. (Just imagine if San Antonio was left with no street repair, no fire or police service, and no trash pick-up for seventy years...)

That's the Jerusalem to which those who returned under Zerubbabel came back. They left a nice home in Persia to return for the work of repairing the wreck of Jerusalem.

Now, if you had been a Jew living in Nehemiah's day - when there was an under-populated Jerusalem - and you were living outside of Jerusalem), what would have been the impact of hearing Nehemiah read this list?

The impact of the list

I'll tell you what I think you would have thought,

"So, Governor Nehemiah's trying to get some of us to pull up stakes and move to Jerusalem. He wants us to return to this place.

'Hmmm...Seventy years ago, great-great grandpa Jeshua moved all the way from Persia to Jerusalem. And he and his family came back to find the city in way worse shape that it is today.

"I guess If he and my great-great grandma did that, then I can follow Nehemiah's call and move my family to Jerusalem, now."

Nehemiah read the long list to the Jews of his day to let them see that they were descendants of heroes. The courage to do great things for God was in their DNA.

His message? *"You can do what God is calling you to do because you're standing on the shoulders of giants and heroes who have gone before you."*

It's the power and the impact of a hero to call us to do more than we think we are capable of doing.

Conclusion:

The 2016 movie, "Hacksaw Ridge" was raw, but good. It told the story of Desmond Doss, a conscientious objector who received the Congressional Medal of Honor for war-time heroism.

Desmond Doss directly saved the lives of nearly eighty soldiers during the Marine assault on the island of Okinawa in World War II. The movie very accurately portrayed Doss' courage under fire.

But I was surprised to learn this week that the director, Mel Gibson, left some of Doss' heroics out of the movie. Gibson believed that they were so "over the top" courage-wise that movie-goers wouldn't believe they actually happened.

Accompanying each Medal of Honor award there is a narrative that tells why the recipient was given the medal. Here's the last line of the Citation for the Medal of Honor for Desmond Doss - *"His name became a symbol throughout the 77th Infantry Division for outstanding gallantry far above and beyond the call of duty."*

Or consider Medal of Honor recipient Roy P. Benavidez.

Master Sergeant Benavidez was a native of El Campo, Texas (not that far from San Antonio). His Citation, which describes his actions in a fierce battle in Vietnam in 1968 includes phrases like *“daring and extremely valorous actions”* and *“he jumped from the hovering helicopter...under withering small arms fire”*.

During the battle that led to his receiving the Medal of Honor, Benavidez suffered gunshot wounds to his right leg, face, and head, the abdomen and thigh. His back was injured by grenade fragments and he was clubbed by the enemy in hand-to-hand combat. Despite all of this, he kept fighting, leading, and protecting the men around him.

Benavidez’ Citation ends with this - *“His fearless personal leadership, tenacious devotion to duty, and extremely valorous actions in the face of overwhelming odds were in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service, and reflect the utmost credit on him and the United States Army.”*

Civilians like me who hear these stories admire and are filled with gratitude and awe for the sacrifices made by men like Desmond Doss and Roy Benavidez.

But, if you’re in the military, the stories have a different effect. If you are serving in combat and find yourself *“under withering small arms fire”*, you know what is possible because of what men did who went before you. Roy Benavidez did it; you can do it, too.

Nehemiah 7:6-73 is a list of God’s Medal of Honor recipients. Nehemiah read the list in 445 BC to inspire his fellow Jews with what was possible because of what others had done before them.

Not long after I came to faith in Jesus, an older Christian advised me, Read Christian biographies!” Well, over the years I’ve read a bunch of them.

One of the first I read was [The Shadow of the Almighty](#), a book that told the story of Jim Elliott. Elliott was the missionary Alex Mandes mentioned in his message last Sunday who was martyred for his faith in Ecuador, South America.

As a young Christian I was stirred and inspired by Elliot’s story to be thoroughly committed to Jesus.

I’ve read the stories of courageous believers suffering persecution, inner-city workers who serve the least, the last, and the lost, martyrs who have died for their faith.

These stories inspire me to follow Jesus the way they did. The message of the lives of these heroes is, *“We did it; you can, too.”*

From beginning to end, the Bible uses the power of story to inspire us and to stir us to faith and obedience.⁷

Imitate Enoch’s walk with God, Noah’s courage, Abraham’s faith, Deborah’s leadership, Ruth’s faithfulness, Daniel’s integrity, Mary’s submissive strength, Paul’s boldness.⁸

They did it; we can, too.

The Jews of Nehemiah’s day heard the reading of the list of those who had returned to Jerusalem to serve God. They heard that list and understood, *“This is the ‘stock’ from which we have come. They lived for God in their generation; we will live for God in ours.”*

They listened as Nehemiah read the list out loud, and they stepped forward to serve God.

Today, you and I are surrounded by what the author of Hebrews calls *“a great cloud of witnesses”* (Hebrew 12:1). They have run their race. Now, they’re calling us to run ours.

We are standing on the shoulders of the Bible heroes who have gone before us, showing us what can be done when we fully entrust ourselves to God.

⁷ [Romans 15:4] *For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.*

⁸ See Hebrews 11 - a chapter devoted to the stories of men and women whose faith calls us to walk by faith.

We are also standing on the shoulders of Christians who, over the centuries, have faced and overcome obstacles like we face today.

These heroes upon whose shoulders you stand are calling you to reach forward, run to the wall and serve Jesus.

What is on your heart to do for God? Others have gone before you. They would tell you, *"What we have done, by the grace of God, YOU can do!"* They are cheering you on. Join them in rushing to the wall, today!

***Remember those who led you,
who spoke the word of God to you;
and considering the result of their conduct,
imitate their faith.
(Hebrews 13:7)***