

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

(September 26, 2021)

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: Everybody in the Game**

(Serving Jesus Together)

### **Serving God, 101**

Study #3

### **(Courtesy of Nehemiah and friends)**

(Nehemiah 3)

#### **Introduction: Our body and Jesus' body...**

The human body is an amazing collection of countless parts, all working in harmony to accomplish its given tasks. To do stuff.

When the brain gets the bright idea to pick up a pencil, eyes focus on the prize, the back leans over, knee joints bend, arms reach, fingers grasp. Voila! The pencil moves.

When muscles coordinate with ligaments and tendons and bones and nerve endings, it is Mission Accomplished for the body.

And that, says the Apostle Paul (in places like 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4) is what the church of Jesus is like.

Each Christian is a unique and vital member of Jesus' *body*. We work with each other inter-dependently. No one of us is a know-it-all or a do-it-all. We each need each other.

And there are no extraneous Christians. Every one of us is necessary to the proper functioning of the whole.

If the church - the worldwide church of Jesus or its local expression here at Northwest - is going to do all that Jesus intends it to do, each Christian is going to have to get in the game, get off the bench, and serve.

Over the last two Sundays, Jeff and I have presented the New Testament picture of the church of Jesus as a body that works together to get stuff done.

Today, I'm going to jump from the New to the Old Testament to draw on what I think is the best illustration of people serving God together we find anywhere in the Bible.

Paul told the Christians in the church at Rome, ***[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.***

We who follow Jesus derive great benefit from Old Testament stories of temples and tabernacles, priests and sacrifices, Red Sea crossings and wilderness wanderings.

So, I'm going to tell you an Old Testament story that will put flesh on Paul's metaphor of the church as a body. This story of people serving God in their day will help us serve Him today.

#### *Background to Nehemiah's story...*

Around 600 BC, because the Jewish people had disobeyed God a lot and for a long time, God sent the leading Jews into captivity in Babylon. He allowed the city of Jerusalem to be sacked, the temple to be destroyed, and the walls protecting the city to be demolished.

Then, after seventy years of Babylonian captivity, a small remnant of Jews returned to the Promised Land with dreams of restoring Jerusalem to its former glory.

Those who came back from captivity envisioned a rebuilt temple, God-pleasing sacrifices, and a rich life in the city.

But the city languished, un-restored for seventy more years, until the time of a guy named Nehemiah, who had been serving as the cupbearer to the Persian king, Artaxerxes, in the capitol city of Susa.

When Nehemiah's brother, Hanani, came from Jerusalem to Susa to tell Nehemiah how bad things were back in Jerusalem, Nehemiah was devastated.<sup>1</sup>

The city was still in ruins. But Nehemiah was most troubled by the fact that after one hundred and forty years, the wall around the city was still torn down.

It is well-documented that in ancient times, with the ever-present threat of raids by enemies, without a wall, a city was hardly even a city. Nehemiah knew that before Jerusalem could get back to its glorious former self, the wall had to be rebuilt.

So, this man, Nehemiah, took it upon himself to lead in the rebuilding of that wall.

He asked for and got permission from the king to carry out this mission. Then, traveling with a military escort, he arrived in Jerusalem, scoped out the situation, made preparations, and laid out the plans for the work to the people who lived in and around the city.

He told them, **[2:17]... "You see the bad situation we are in, that Jerusalem is desolate and its gates have been burned by fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem so that we will no longer be a disgrace."**

The people were inspired by Nehemiah's passion and vision. They said, **[2:18] "Let's arise and build"** - and from that moment forward, it was "Game On!" to get the wall built.

The third chapter of Nehemiah's book recounts the beginning stages of the work on the wall.

All I want to do for the next few minutes is make a few obvious observations of how the work was organized and carried out.

I think that what the Jews were doing as they served God's purposes in Jerusalem in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC will provide some great help to us as we seek to serve Jesus in 2021.

### **An Overview of the Work and the Workers**

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

In the days of Nehemiah, Jerusalem proper took up about three hundred and twenty acres, which is not a lot of property. If we imagine the city as a rectangle, it would have been roughly one mile by about one-half mile.<sup>2</sup>

And it was divided into districts, much as we break up San Antonio into subdivisions like Braun Station, Northwest Crossing, and New Territories.

Then, archaeologists tell us that there were twelve gates leading into and out of the city. (Sheep, Fish, Old, Broad, Furnace, Valley, Refuse, Fountain, Water, Horse, East, and Inspection Gates)

There. Now we know something about the city, which is good. But the point of turning to Nehemiah is to note the workers and the work, which is what Nehemiah, chapter 3 is all about.

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

The first thing you'll notice as you speed read the chapter are a whole lot of nearly unpronounceable Jewish names.

This is significant, but not in the way you might think. Lots of commentaries on Nehemiah have found great significance in the meaning of some of the Jewish names of the workers. I don't.

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<sup>1</sup> He spent five months weeping and mourning, then fasting and praying, then planning for the day when he would go to Jerusalem and restore its glory.

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<sup>2</sup> We know that by Nehemiah's day Jerusalem was a good bit smaller than it was in Solomon's time.

The important thing here is not what the names mean, but that the workers were named.

If Nehemiah had been aiming for efficiency, he could have summarized the chapter with a Reader's Digest-like version of chapter 3. He could have just written, "*And a whole bunch of people worked on the walls and the gates, and they got the job done.*"

But that is not what he wrote, and I thank God that he named **Eliashib** and **Zaccur** and **Hassenaah** and **Meremoth** and **Meshullam** and **Joiada** and **Melatiah** and **Jadon** and lots of others.

Names. Individuals. Flesh and blood people. This may not be the way it is in ancient or modern society. But this is always God's way.

Today, to the IRS, I am a dollar figure; to the Census Bureau, a statistic; to the corner store, a credit card. Nehemiah's story has names.

Jesus said, "***I call My sheep by name***" (John 10:3) for a reason.

If you spend time reading through the New Testament, you'll notice a lot of names. You'll start wondering, "*Why the names? Why are we introduced to so many of the Apostle Paul's co-laborers, by name?*"

Why mention **Timothy** and **Titus** and **Barnabas** and **Silas** and **Phoebe** and **Prisca** and **Aquila** and **Mary** and **Andronicus** and **Aristarchus** and **Luke** and **Rufus** and **John Mark** and **Philemon** and **Damaris** and **Lydia**?

These people are named because names identify and honor the individual. Each one. In the church of Jesus Christ, you are not a cog in a wheel. You have a name. You count. You matter. Your work matters.

There are no nobodies in God's work. Everybody is a somebody in Jesus' church.

In addition to having names, we notice that the wall-workers were identified by their jobs and professional lives.

### **The Workers were Already BUSY**

Some who worked on the walls were religious professionals like the High Priest, the regular priests, and the Levites (vv. 1, 22, 26).

Some were government officials and bureaucrats who ruled over cities and half districts and whole districts. Others were tradesmen: perfumers (v. 8), merchants (v. 32), and goldsmiths (v. 31).

Some of the construction crews consisted of whole families who built together - men, women, and children.<sup>3</sup>

It's important that we know that the workers were hard at work in their work before the work on the wall started.

Those who built the wall weren't standing around with their hands in their pockets looking for something to do. It wasn't like they had nothing better to do than to join Nehemiah in this wall-building venture. Not at all.

These people were busy with their lives. They were up to their eyeballs with things to do.<sup>4</sup> Joining in the work of building the city's wall meant putting important things on hold. It meant sacrifice.

Just like today, right? Saying "Yes" to serve Jesus will always mean saying "No" to something else.

Sometimes it will mean saying "No" to video games or leisure TV time. At times, you'll say "No" to something good and productive so that you can say "Yes" to something transcendent and of eternal weight and value.

It's worth it, though, right? It's worth it to say "Yes" to serving Jesus. There's nothing more timely or more fulfilling than serving Him.

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<sup>3</sup> This is mentioned in verse 12. Many of us have seen children and youth be very effective in demolition. Here, they prove useful in construction. ☺

<sup>4</sup> Remember, Palestine was an agrarian society. And in agrarian societies, most who weren't farmers still had to manure and prepare their family garden's soil, plant, cultivate, water, harvest - or they didn't eat. Yes, these people were busy!

And let's notice a couple more things about the workforce.

FIRST, while most of the workers lived in or right around the city of Jerusalem, some workers came from neighboring cities - Jericho, Tekoa, Gibeon, Zanoah - to help with the work.<sup>5</sup>

SECOND, as I have thumbed through the chapter, I count forty-two separate work crews.

I mention these two items to highlight that there were undoubtedly some logistical challenges to overcome while the work was going on, like...

- ...who providing housing for the commuting workers?
- ...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 maintain quality of work among so many crews?

These and other obstacles had to be worked through. The fact that they were worked through shows an amazing flexibility and a resolute single-mindedness on the part of the workers to *"get 'er done."*

To which I say, Covid. Lockdowns. Quarantining. Health protocols. Significant loss.

Today, you and I have to overcome obstacles to get normal stuff done. Life is more complicated than it was eighteen months ago. For some, devastatingly so. And the work of Jesus has continued.

I have been so thrilled to see the workarounds that you have created to keep serving Jesus here.

- Worship services were almost instantly live streamed.
- ESL and small groups and Women's and Men's ministries took crash courses in Zoom.
- Youth leaders and youth made adjustments to make the best connections they could.
- Children's ministry workers served with precautions. Same for the Nursery.

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<sup>5</sup> See verses 2, 5, 7, 13, 27. We can only imagine the sacrifices they endured by leaving their jobs, and their trades, and their crops in the fields.

- Your generosity to this ministry has continued.

And as we have learned, nearly all our cross-cultural ministry partners have made adjustments to serve Jesus virtually while international travel has been so hard.

Obstacles didn't stop the work in ancient Jerusalem and it hasn't stopped the work here, either. There and then as well as here and now, if someone wants to serve, they serve - in person or online. If there are logistical issues to deal with, they'll get dealt with.

Anybody who wants to serve God was and is invited to get their hands dirty, get sweaty, get in the game.

But not everybody in Jerusalem wanted to be put to work. All were invited, but not all participated.

### Some "workers" DIDN'T!

***[3:5] Moreover, next to him (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 didn't work. We wonder...

Did they think the work was beneath them?

Were they hopeless that the project could even be finished?

Whatever the reasons might have been, you've got to feel sorry for them. Yes, pity the Tekoite nobles. By not working they lost out, big time.

Think of what they lost.

- They lost the opportunity to learn something about wall building.
- They missed out on the joy of watching God grant success to their labors.
- They lost the fellowship that comes from being involved in a joint project with like-minded people.
- They lost the chance to be captured by a vision for the glory of Jerusalem's future.

It is a loss today when you or I don't serve Jesus. I say that, not to twist arms or to induce guilt, but because there's nothing more fulfilling than serving Him. And you can be assured that Jesus is inviting you to serve Him.

Some, in Nehemiah's day, didn't serve. But you'll notice that the service continued.

Oh, it would have been nice to have had the Tekoite nobles working along with everybody else. And their absence DID make the work harder for everyone else. But the work continued.

If the workers said anything at all to the Tekoite nobles, it was probably something like, *"You don't want to work? OK. But would you get out of the way so that Meshullam can hand me another brick!"*

I'm not sure why these Tekoite nobles are mentioned.

Maybe it was to remind us that there will always be those who don't put their hands to the good work. Or maybe it was to warn us to not imitate them and so become the biggest losers.

But the fact that the Tekoite nobles are recorded tells us that God notices when we don't serve Him. And He notices when we do, and even when our service is exceptional.

### **Some Workers EXCELLED!**

Some of the workers worked at more than one place on the wall. They did "double duty."<sup>6</sup>

And you'll love Baruch: ***[3:20]...Baruch the son of Zabbai ZEALOUSLY repaired another section, from the Angle to the doorway of the house of Eliashib the high priest.***

I am impressed with the zeal and the high energy of all those who served on the wall team. But Baruch's zeal evidently stood out from all the rest.

All these workers had put their hearts in the work, just like we are urged to put our hearts into serving Jesus, longing for the day when we'll hear, *"Well done, good and faithful slave!"*

### **Summary and Preview:**

We have now seen THAT the work got done. That's important. But it's just as important that we see HOW the work got done. What motivated these workers?

We'll get great help in finding motivation for our service for Jesus when we learn how these Jews were motivated to do their work.

I am going to make the case in the time that remains that the work was organized and arranged so as to leverage "want-to" motivation.

Nehemiah records the rebuilding of the wall, gate by gate by gate, section of the wall by section of the wall. And starting at the beginning, we find the high priest working with his brother priests.

It's great to see that these leaders are working. Now, notice where they are working.

### **Leveraging "Want-to" Motivation**

#### **CARE Ensures Quality**

***[1a] Eliashib, the high priest arose with his brothers the priests and built the Sheep Gate; they consecrated it and installed its doors.***

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<sup>6</sup> Note Meremoth (vv. 4, 21), Meshullam (vv. 4, 30), and the people from Tekoa (vv. 5, 27). How cool! The nobles didn't work, but the people from Tekoa served with distinction.

The priesthood had responsibility for the sacrifices that were offered every day in the recently rebuilt temple.

Every day they would go out of the city to the pastures where the sheep were. They would buy the sheep and then bring the sheep to the place of sacrifice.

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 city about which the priests would have had special interest and special concern for quality construction, it was the Sheep Gate.

Their care about the Sheep Gate ensured that they would build this gate right and that the walls supporting the gate's hinges would be put together strong.

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

So, if there was no place the priests would have rather worked than at the Sheep Gate in ancient Jerusalem, let me ask you: Is there one aspect of the life and ministry of Northwest that you care most deeply about?

There are so many facets of our body here. There are ministries to youth, children, and babies, care of facilities and grounds, missions and local outreach, music, technology, and more.

No doubt you're concerned at some level about all of it. But is there one thing that has captured your imagination?

Every time you hear this thing mentioned, you think to yourself, *"Now THAT'S really cool. I'd love to serve there. I'd love to be a part of making a difference in people's lives through that. I'd get a kick out of contributing to THAT."*

Do you suppose that Jesus, the Head of the "Body", might have put THAT on your heart, that He's inviting you to invest your time, treasure, and talent there?

Most of the people I know who are serving here at our church are serving where they are serving because there is simply no arena in which they would rather serve than right there.

That is so often God's method. We serve best when we serve where we want to.

OK, look at Nehemiah 3, again. Listen carefully as I read and see if you hear a repeated detail.

### **HOME Run!**

***[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.***

*Convenience is convenient*

You really can't miss it. Many of the teams worked on a part of the wall that was adjacent to their home. How convenient.

No commuting required. Just roll out of bed and start to work. Brilliant.

Where it was possible, the people were serving in the wall-building work where it made sense for them to serve.

Imagine that. Serving God, or for us, serving Jesus, where it makes sense for us.

Now, did working for on that wall in Jerusalem sometimes involve inconvenience and hardship? Sure! And did everybody build where they wanted to build? Probably not.

Some of the Jews got assigned places on the wall just because, well, *“Listen, David, somebody has to re-build the Refuse Gate. (i.e. - Dung Gate) Tag - you’re it!”*

And will there be those times when you and I are going to be asked to step up to the plate and serve Jesus outside of our comfort zone because there is a need? Likely.

But one of the many evidences of the goodness of God is that He did not in Nehemiah’s day require that His people serve Him only where it was inconvenient or only when it was a nuisance.

The same thing is true today. It’s the old “bloom where you are planted” theme, applied to ministry: SERVE JESUS WHERE YOU ARE.

- You don’t get out much these days? OK. But you have a pen and paper or a computer. You can write notes that encourage your friends to walk with Jesus.
- You already spend time at home. Serve Jesus there by speaking encouraging words that point your family or your roommates to God.
- You spend a lot of your time - most of your waking hours? - at work. Look for ways to serve Jesus there, shining by your attitude, being salty and whetting people’s appetites for the Lord.
- You spend a lot of time at school and with friends. Look at that time as an opportunity to press Jesus into your friends’ lives.

In Jerusalem, under Nehemiah’s leadership, people worked where they had good reason to want to build and to build well. “Want-to” motivation is the normal pattern by which God moves His work forward.

It’s how He moves members of Jesus’ body to serve today. It was how He moved people to build a wall and gates around an ancient city. In fact, it’s how the whole wall-building enterprise got started.

We’ll close out this morning by considering the guy behind the project, the one who, humanly speaking, got the ball rolling: Nehemiah.

### **The Curious, Inspiring Case of the Un-Assigned**

How did it happen that Nehemiah left the palace in Susa, back in Persia, traveled hundreds of miles to Israel, rallied a group of people to the vision to **“arise and build”**, worked through obstacles, and invested years of his life and lots of his personal riches to protect Jerusalem?

Who told him to go and do this?

King Artaxerxes didn’t. His brother, Hanani, didn’t. The Jews of Jerusalem didn’t beg him to come and help.

And based on what we read in the Bible, God never told Nehemiah to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem.

It was simply something He wanted to do. God used Nehemiah’s “want-to” motivation to get the job done.

A spiritually sensitive man who loved God became aware of a great need. He opened his heart to that need and was possessed by a passion to meet that need to the glory of God.

Nehemiah recognized that he had been allowed to come to Jerusalem **because he wanted to** and honored the workers by assigning them work on the wall at places where they naturally **wanted** to build.

So now the question comes to us: Where do you want to serve the purposes of God? How do you want to serve in Jesus’ Name?

### **Conclusion:**

Nehemiah’s story invites us each to look at the broken-down lives we see. Today, Jesus is calling us to build up people. He’s not asking us to repair the rubble of broken-down gates, but of broken-down lives.

The human need is everywhere, and the wreckage is all around us. Can you see it? If you do, great. If not, keep looking until you do. Ask God to open your eyes to see.

Then, when you see the needs, prayerfully ask God, *“Where might I invest energy and time and money and talents and possessions to serve this need, these people, in Jesus’ Name?”*

Don’t rush it. Be patient. Talk with others about it. Think. Write. Dream. Pray.

And when you have determined before God where you want to invest (READY!), energized by God’s Spirit (SET!), step out in faith, and serve in Jesus’ Name (GO!)