

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

SERMON SERIES: Forward - Together!

(studies in Nehemiah)

EVERYBODY to the Wall!

(Nehemiah 3, part 1)

Study #5

Introduction: Ready, Set, GO!...

In a normal election cycle, the presidential campaign would be starting about now.

Historically, the week-long major party conventions kick off the season for the candidates to begin criss-crossing the country. This time around, of course, the campaign season has already been in full swing for about eighteen months!

Now that the conventions are over, though, things will get more serious. Over the next few weeks, voters will be finally convinced, one way or the other. Issues are weighed, candidates are considered, and decisions are made.

But these next 60 days are still preparatory to the work.

Then, on Tuesday, November 4th, Americans will cast their votes and a new president will be elected (along with countless other national, state and local officials).

Even then, though, the real work won't start. President Bush will still be in office for another seventy seven days.

But then, finally, on January 20th, 2009, either Barak Obama or John McCain will take the oath of office, become the 44th president of the United States of America - and THEN the work will begin.

Years of preparation will finally be behind and the work of governing from the highest office in the land will commence.

We can only imagine the sense of eagerness that both the candidates feel for uncorking the pressure of years of waiting to begin the work on January 21st!

If you've ever worked on something for a long time (months? years?), you know how the new president will be feeling as he jumps out of bed on January 21st to get to work.

And if you've ever spent months or years preparing for a major work, then you know how Nehemiah and the Jews in Jerusalem felt when the day dawned that marked the beginning of work rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem!

Months earlier, Nehemiah's brother, Hanani, had brought news from Jerusalem about the bad condition the city was in.

Nehemiah was devastated by the news and spent five months weeping and mourning, then fasting and praying, then planning for the day when he would be able to restore Jerusalem.

That several months period came to a sudden halt when, one fateful day, the Persian king, Artaxerxes, questioned Nehemiah about his sadness.

Well, the king was sympathetic to Nehemiah's concerns and (because the good hand of God was on Nehemiah! 2:8) gave him everything he asked for to accomplish the rebuilding of the walls around Jerusalem!

He provided letters guaranteeing safe passage and provision for all the supplies he would need to buy.

Nehemiah, along with a military escort, took a several months long journey to Jerusalem and then spent some time (weeks? months) scoping out the situation, preparing, laying the groundwork in Jerusalem itself.

Eventually, after seeing the wreckage for himself, he challenged the people of Jerusalem, [2:17] *"Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem so that we will no longer be a reproach."*

And the people of Jerusalem said, [2:18] *“Let us arise and build.”*

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.

Chapter 3 of the book of Nehemiah shows us the beginning stage of the actual work of rebuilding walls that had been broken down for one hundred and forty years!

Now, because this chapter is found in God’s Word, we believe that it contains vital truth for us.

But, in some ways, as a preacher, coming to this chapter is similar to coming to a genealogy in the middle of a sermon series. The question, *“What do I do with this?!”* comes to mind.¹

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.

In this seemingly dry list of names, though, we discover how God spells “success” in Kingdom work.

This morning, I want to simply observe some pretty obvious stuff, stuff that will come in real handy as we - like the Jews in Nehemiah’s Jerusalem - engage in a great undertaking for God.

An Overview of the Work

Background: The physical setting of Jerusalem

In the days of Nehemiah, Jerusalem proper took up about 320 acres. That is not much land!²

¹ It is at times like this that I am reminded of one of my Seminary professors, Dr. Howard Hendricks, who said, *“You haven’t heard me preach until you’ve heard me preach a genealogy.”* Well, there have actually been a few moments this past week when I would have loved to have heard Dr. Hendricks on this passage!

² You might wish to look at a map in a Bible Atlas, or even in the back of your Bible to see a pictorial of Jerusalem in the Post-Exilic period.

It the city had been laid out as a rectangle, it would be roughly one mile by about one half mile. That would be about from the distance from our church down Guilbeau to the HEB - and then one half mile deep.

Now, of course, the surrounding area was also considered “Jerusalem.” But the area that was to be enclosed within the walls that Nehemiah wanted to build was not very spacious.³

From this chapter, we discover that the city was divided into several districts, perhaps similar to the way we fashion subdivisions here in San Antonio (i.e. Braun Station, Northwest Crossing, Braun Hollow, etc...).

And, we know from archaeology that there were twelve major gates⁴ leading into and out of the city: Sheep,⁵ Fish, Old, Broad, Furnace, Valley, Refuse, Fountain, Water, Horse, East, and Inspection Gates.

While it may be helpful to note the details about the city, the chapter is obviously concerned with the workers and the work! First, notice that the workers are named.

The Workers had NAMES

In reading the commentaries, I find it interesting that some have seen great significance in the meaning of the Jewish names of the workers. I don’t. I really don’t think that the Hebrew meaning of this or that worker’s name was important.

³ We do know that by Nehemiah’s day Jerusalem was a good bit smaller than it was in Solomon’s time.

⁴ At least one commentator takes the gates and their supposed significance beyond the point of ridiculousness! “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; etc....” Such a treatment of the gates is neither helpful nor necessary. The gates certainly had significance, but there is no reason to manufacture a “spiritual” interpretation of them.

⁵ Many of these gates are very significant, and it would make for a fascinating study to trace each gate’s use during the history of the city. For instance, Jesus walked through the Sheep Gate on the night of His arrest both coming and going from Gethsemane. This does serve as a striking bit of symbolism, as He played out the part of the sacrificial Lamb of God.

The important thing here is not what the names mean, but that the names are recorded! Nehemiah didn't write, "*And a whole bunch of people worked on the walls and the gates, and they got the job done.*"!

No! He mentioned **Eliashib** and **Zaccur** and **Hassenaah** and **Meremoth** and **Meshullam** and **Joiada** and **Melatiah** and **Jadon** and **Uzziel!**⁶

To the IRS, I am a dollar figure; to the Census Bureau, a statistic; to the corner store, a credit card! But Nehemiah calls people by their name.

That is always God's way.

For the last two thousand years, the co-laborers of the Apostle Paul have been in evidence for everyone to see.

Because he named them, we know about **Timothy** and **Titus** and **Barnabas** and **Silas**. We know about **Phoebe** and **Prisca** 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.

Names are very important! In the church of Jesus Christ, you are more than a cog in a wheel. You have a name. You count. You matter. Your work matters.

And in addition to having names, these workers, for the most part, had regular 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 - 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.⁷

⁶ At the same time, we must accept the probability that this is not an exhaustive list of workers.

⁷ 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. ☺

If we don't recognize that these people had regular, paying, day-jobs, we could get the idea that the citizens of Jerusalem were standing around with their hands in their pockets, with nothing better to do than to join Nehemiah in a wall-building venture when he rode into town. That was not the case at all.

These people were busy with their lives. They were - like you - up to their eyeballs with things to do. AND Palestine was an agrarian society.

In agrarian societies, people work! If they don't work - manuring and preparing the soil, tilling soil, planting, cultivating, watering, harvesting - they don't eat.

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.⁸ Second, as I have thumbed through the chapter, I count forty two separate work crews.

I mention these two items to show that there may have been some challenges in logistics.

- 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? (We can probably also assume that there was some disparity in the ability of the workers to do heavy construction.)

These and other issues 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.

Bottom line? No matter what a person's regular employment was, if he or she wanted to work, they got put to work! Everybody who wanted to work on the wall was allowed to get their hands dirty on the wall.

⁸ Men came from the cities of Jericho, Tekoa, Gibeon, and Zanoah (vv. 2, 5, 7, 13, 27). And we can only imagine the sacrifices they endured by leaving their jobs, and their trades, and their crops in the fields.

But, not everybody in Jerusalem wanted to be put to work.

All were invited, but not all participated. They were not all cut out of the same mold - some were moldier than others!

Some “workers” just DIDN’T!

[3:5] Moreover, next to him (Zadok, referenced in 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?

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 missed out on the joy of seeing 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 opportunity to learn something about wall building.
- They lost the chance to be captured by a vision for the glory of Jerusalem’s future.

It is always a loss to any worker who refuses to engage in God’s work.

But notice. The work of God went on without these nay-sayers. Nehemiah and the people didn’t allow the reticent Tekoite nobles to deter them from their task. As far as we can tell, they spent no energy trying to get these sideline sitting nobles to get in the game.

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

“You don’t want to work? Fine. 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 here 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 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!

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! While the Tekoite people received no support from their rulers, they still made a great contribution to the work of God.

And yet another hero 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.

As impressed as I am with all the zeal and the high energy associated with the entire project, here is one man whose zeal stands out from all the rest.

In the same way that the Tekoite nobles have been singled out for **shame**, so these workers - Meremoth, Meshullam, the people from Tekoa, and Baruch - have been singled out for **fame** by anyone who has picked up the book of Nehemiah to read it over the last twenty five hundred years.

Summary:

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

But this project is of special concern to us, because it was all about furthering the purposes of God. It's important that we see, not only THAT the work got done, but HOW it got done.

Like those in Nehemiah's day, we too are all about furthering the purposes of God. And we can learn something about the work in front of us by watching them attack their 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 the next few minutes, I want us all to see that the work was organized and arranged so as to maximize "want-to" motivation.

Follow the movement of this chapter and you'll 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. OK. Look where they are working.

"Want-to" Motivation

CARE Ensures Quality

[1] 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.

The priesthood had responsibility for the sacrifices that were offered, daily, in the recently rebuilt temple. They would go out of the city, daily, to the pastures where the sheep were. They would buy the sheep and then bring the sheep 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 in which the priests would have had special interest and special concern for quality construction, it was the Sheep Gate.

Their hearts were there and that's where they built. Their care about the use to which the Sheep Gate was put ensured that this gate would be built right and that the walls supporting the gate's hinges would be put together strong.

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

If there was no place the priests would have rather worked than at the Sheep Gate, let me ask you - Is there one aspect of the life and ministry of Northwest Community Church that you care most deeply about?

There are so many facets of our life together - youth, children, babies, facilities, grounds, missions, music and more.

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

Every time you hear this thing mentioned, you think to yourself, "Now *THAT'S* really cool. *THAT* should be flourishing. *THAT* could make a huge difference in people's lives. I love *THAT* thing about our church."

Do you suppose the Lord of the church might have put that part of the church's ministry on your heart so that you might invest your time, your treasure, your talent there?

Might that aspect of what is going on here be your "Sheep Gate"?

There are people who are serving here at Northwest, who are serving where they are because there is no place they would rather serve than right there! And that is so often God's method. We serve best when we serve where we care.

OK, let's look at Nehemiah 3, again. One thing that will stand out to you as you read about the workers' assignments is that many of them built right in front of their own homes.

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.⁹

Convenience fosters "want-to" motivation

One of the most obvious advantages to having people work on the part of the wall that was right in front of their homes was convenience. No commuting required. Just roll out of bed and start to work. Brilliant!

The Jews in Nehemiah's Jerusalem were involving themselves in the wall-building and Kingdom of God-building work where it made sense **FOR THEM**, the builders. Imagine that. Working for the glory of God where it was convenient.

Now, did working for the Kingdom of God and the glory of God sometimes involve inconvenience, pain, suffering and loss? Sure!

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** when it was inconvenient or troublesome.

⁹ Archaeologists have found that at least one point in the Nehemiah's Wall (probably the broad wall, v. 8) was 22 feet thick. By and large, though, the wall was probably of rough work, approximately 8 feet thick.

The same thing is true today. He is happy to use us in ways and at times when we are available. Think about this when it comes to serving Jesus. It's the old "bloom where you are planted" theme, applied to ministry: **SERVE WHERE YOU ARE.**

- You already spend time at home. Serve Jesus at home by speaking encouraging words that point the members of your family or your roommates to faith in Christ.
- You spend a lot of your time at work. Look for ways to serve Jesus there, shining by your attitude, being salty and whetting people's appetite's for the Lord.
- You already spend a lot of time at school and with friends. Look at that time as opportunity to build into your friends' lives with God-words.
- You enjoy a good cup of coffee at Community Blend on Wednesdays during Love and Guts and AWANA, on Thursdays evenings or on Sunday mornings before services begin. Why not join the Community Blend volunteer staff and serve Jesus, people and coffee at the same time?
- You are at church every Sunday AND you have an aptitude for teaching AND you love kids. Could you leverage those three streams into a convenient way to serve Jesus?

Building the wall right in front of your house opens up all kinds of possibilities!

And there is ANOTHER THING to take into consideration when we think about the Jews working on the part of the wall in front of their homes. There was vested interest.

Vested interest is a force multiplier

Some measure of quality control was virtually guaranteed when a family built the wall in front of their house. Why? This would be the part of the wall that would repel the attack of an enemy invasion!

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.

Are there ministries at Northwest that are vitally connected to your well-being or to the well-being of people you love?

Do you have major concerns and does your heart bleed for certain people or groups of people (babies, children, youth, college aged, young parents, disabled, the elderly, those addicted to destructive lifestyles, people who are depressed, those who have suffered abuse, people who are involved in false religions, the poor, the homeless, women who have experienced the trauma of abortion)?

Is there something in your past that has especially sensitized you to the needs of certain people and groups?

Might that sensitivity and that burning desire indicate that these people are the part of the wall to which you are called? Are these people the people you want to serve?

Want-To Motivation

Standard Operating Procedure

Throughout our exploration of the wall-rebuilding effort we read about in Nehemiah's third chapter today, I've been highlighting "want-to" motivation. The idea is that people built the wall where they had good reason to want to build.

Now, did everybody build where they wanted to build? Probably not. Did some of the Jews get assigned places on the wall just because, well, "*Listen, Levi, somebody had to build by the Refuse Gate. Tag - you're it!*" Sure.

And will there be those times when you and I are going to need 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? Absolutely.

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

Nehemiah Wasn't Assigned!

In our present study, let's understand how it happened that Nehemiah got to Jerusalem. Based on what we have 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 and became 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 you: Where do you want to build?

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 thoroughly 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 Eldridge...).

Near the end of the book, he urges his readers to NOT ask, "*What does the world need now?*" as a way to find out where they should invest their energies.

He pleads with each of his readers to ask, "*As a redeemed man, what do I WANT to do for my world, for my Savior?*"

I'm going to broaden what Eldridge says now because I believe there is application to both sexes. But, broadened, John Eldridge says 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. Those who serve best are those who serve enthusiastically, and those who serve enthusiastically are those who are doing exactly what they have always wanted to do.

Look at the broken-down walls, the dilapidated lives in front of you. And then ask yourself, "*Where would I most enjoy investing my energy and time and money and talents and resources and possessions?*"

Then go there!

What I believe Nehemiah 3 does, and what I would love to do this morning, is to put to sleep the myth that says that God will only use people when they are doing something unpleasant or unnatural.

The Jews in Nehemiah 3 were serving where their hearts were. And I would say to you, today, serve where your heart is!

If the ministry here at Northwest and reaching out to northwest San Antonio represents the wall-building to which God is calling our church, the chances are good that the part of the wall to which He is calling YOU is that part that is closest to your heart.