

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **SERMON SERIES: Forward - Together!**

(studies in Nehemiah)

#### **Reflections from the Wall**

(Nehemiah 3, part 2)

Study #6

#### **Introduction: God spells success...**

It is the secret to USA Basketball's Gold Medal accomplishment in Beijing and to every one of the San Antonio Spurs' NBA Championships.

It is the secret to every great night at Love & Guts and AWANA as well as every Double Bar Basketball Camp and Vacation Bible School.

It was the secret to the successful rollout of Apple's iPhone, Touch and Shuffle, to San Antonio's hospitable response to Hurricane Ike, and to the Jews' rebuilding of the walls around Jerusalem in the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.

What is "it"? Well, "it" is TEAMWORK.

You've probably experienced the power of teamwork in your own life. Whether in sports or academics or business, the military, the home or church, no one denies that teamwork is a force multiplier.

The saying, "*We're better together*" is true. And when it comes to success in the work of God's Kingdom, from beginning to end, from Old Testament to New, God spells success: T-E-A-M-W-O-R-K.

This day, we watch the Jews of Nehemiah's day corral the power of teamwork. And we take notes on how they did it because WE need the power of teamwork here and now for the wall-building the Lord of the church has put before us.

Last Sunday morning we watched as the Jews in Jerusalem began work rebuilding the wall around the city. (Nehemiah 3)

To review, many of the wall builders were named. Over the past twenty five hundred years, those who have read their Bibles have known the names of these builders. The names of those who refused to build (those annoying Tekoite nobles!) have been just as well-known.

In some ways, this wall-building project was like most projects we have ever been involved with. Some worked, some worked harder than others, some didn't work at all - and God noticed it all.

Of course, the work would have gone better if ALL of God's people had worked and worked hard. But the work was God's work. And the people of God made sure that the work of God went forward.

This morning, we continue in Nehemiah's third chapter. Here we find a record of a season when God's people, captured by a vision for the glory of God, accomplished the work of God - together, as a team.

And we, who also have a vision for the glory of God, see here a path to follow for our own wall-building ventures, a path that is as reliable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century AD as it was in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC.

There is no doubt about it. When things finally got cranked up to rebuild the wall, the workers hit the ground running, energized and enthused. The reason?

#### **For Best Results, Give Real Responsibility**

#### **It's All about WE, not ME**

Well, I think the reason is clear: From the very first mention of the project, the people in Jerusalem were given ownership in the venture.

Look back to chapter 2. When Nehemiah first went public and called all the people together to announce the project, he did not make the wall-building about himself. Listen to his speech.

*[2:17]...“You see the bad situation WE are in, that Jerusalem is desolate and its gates burned by fire. COME, LET US REBUILD the wall of Jerusalem so that WE will no longer be a reproach.”*

This wasn't a ME thing, it was a WE thing!

Then, he told them all about what had happened back in Susa.

*[18a] I told them how the hand of my God had been favorable to me and also about the king's words which he had spoken to me.*

He replayed the scene in Artaxerxes' court where he let the king know the reason for his great sadness. He told them about the king's IMMEDIATE offer of support. He told them about how the king agreed to supply Nehemiah with whatever he needed to both get to Jerusalem and to see the work move forward.

But, in telling these wonderful stories of God's provision, the people never got the sense that the wall-building venture was all about Nehemiah! They were not being invited to support an egomaniac's dream.

And thus challenged, the people responded with great enthusiasm, *[18b]...Then they said, “Let us arise and build.” So they put their hands to the good work.*

From the outset, it was clear that the reproach they were suffering was **theirs**, the bad situation was **theirs**, the project was **theirs**, and the benefit that would come from re-building would be **theirs**!

Last week, we saw that incredible things can be accomplished in the work of God when there is “want-to” motivation. Today, we see that incredible things can be accomplished in the work of God when the workers are given R-E-S-P-E-C-T.

So, how was this genuine personal respect communicated to the people? I discover two ways from the words of the chapter.

FIRST, the work was not heavily bureaucratized.

## No Red Tape

### *Chains of command*

Most projects you and I have ever been involved with are overseen by a hierarchy of some sort, a chain of command.

Always, there is a boss. Then, there are managers under the boss. Sometimes there are sub-managers under the managers. And at times, there are sub-sub-managers under the sub-managers!

Then, there are workers.

The military is a highly structured organization and a great example of hierarchy. For the best of reasons, there is a chain of command in the military. The Department of Defense “org chart” consists of a dizzying array of levels and sub-levels.

But that was not the case in Nehemiah's Jerusalem. In the Jerusalem wall-building project, there were workers - and that was about it.

As far as I can see, there was not a highly structured hierarchy of managers and overseers. Their org chart was very simple. It was virtually FLAT. There were workers. Period.

My point here is not to make fun of organization. Organization is necessary to accomplishing any significant work. And the work of building the walls around Jerusalem **was** organized.

But - and how many times have we seen this? - bureaucracy can KILL mission!

### *The chains that bind*

Over bureaucratization will kill the mission of a growing, dynamic city, company, or church.

The reason why bureaucracy kills is that as the organization grows more complex, more and more people are removed farther and farther from the work that the organization was originally formed to accomplish.

This requires that more and more work has to go in to the task of constantly re-stating the mission.

Let's go back to the military. According to its website, the mission of the Department of Defense is to "provide the military forces needed to deter war and to protect the security of our country."

That's one clear mission statement!

But some people in the US military are ten degrees of separation removed from ever firing a bullet. So the military has to help that person who is farthest from the front lines to understand how his or her job is related to the nation's security.

Similarly, employed by every hospital are some people who never even see, much less treat, a patient. The hospital has to ensure that every person in the organization understands how his or her job relates to the healing task.

So here's the deal.

- The more complex the organization, the harder the organization has to work to help each worker see how his or her work contributes to the main work of the organization.
- The more streamlined the organization, the less work has to be directed toward helping each worker understand how his or her work contributes to the main work - and the more work can be directed to the work!

In Jerusalem, the work was wall building. And in Jerusalem, if you were involved in the project, you were building the wall. There was little, if any hierarchy, bureaucracy or red tape.

#### *Streamlining the work*

What a picture perfect model for life in the body of Christ!

Appropriate levels of organization have to be in place in the church. BUT, the more streamlined, the better. The less red tape, the better. The more empowerment of each worker, the better.

Not only are there to be no sideline sitters in the work of the Kingdom of God, there are to be no second or third tier workers in the Kingdom of God.

Every task carried out in the church is mission critical. If a task we are doing in the church is not mission critical, well, let's just agree to stop doing it, OK?

Let's just agree that if we can't trace a task back to the **Great Commandment** (love God with heart, soul, mind and strength), the **New Commandment** (love each other as Jesus loves us), or the **Great Commission** (make disciple of all nations) in three steps or less, we won't do it!

What kept the workforce going and motivated in Jerusalem was seeing a direct tie-in between what they were doing and the WORK.

And what keeps Christians going and motivated is seeing a direct tie-in between what they are doing and the WORK of Jesus: worship, love, service.

The first thing, then, is that there was precious little red tape involved in this work. SECOND, look at the job assignments each work crew received.

#### **To the Front Lines!**

##### *Specialization's specialties*

"Specialization" is the watchword of our day. In the medical profession, there is the Family Physician. But, increasingly, there are medical specializations and sub-specializations.

In the legal field, attorneys can specialize in family law, tort, corporate, bankruptcy, personal injury, health, or naturalization and immigration law.

Involved in the broad field of construction are architects, civil engineers, electricians, plumbers, framers, drywall hangers, and painters. Each one does a specific job.

I remember how it was when we were building out the empty shell of this shopping center in 1991-92, so that it would be fit for worship and ministry.

Each phase of the work was overseen by a General Contractor who hired out specialists to do their own part - be it setting studs, laying in ceiling tile, HVAC, lighting, paint, plumbing or carpet.

At each stage, too, the city would send inspectors to ensure that everything was up to code and built according to quality standards. Experts each did their own specific part of the overall task.

So, what level of specialization do we see in the work of wall-building recorded in Nehemiah 3?

Not much. Their project was organized a bit differently than Northwest's various projects have been through the years.

*In Jerusalem, especially GENERAL*

In Jerusalem, each crew was responsible for an entire section of the wall. There was precious little need for or room for specialization. The workers were all, by necessity, generalists. No part of the wall was left unfinished while workers waited around for the expert.<sup>1</sup>

Now, let me guess what you are thinking - at least if you are thinking what I was thinking when I realized this: DOESN'T THIS METHOD COMPROMISE THE QUALITY OF THE WORK ON THE WALL?

*What about quality control?*

Would it not have been better to divide up the tasks and designate one crew to lay the foundation stones all the way around the wall; another crew to lay first level bricks all the way around, another to pour the mortar all the way around, another to lay the top layers all the way around? Another crew to specialize in gates?

That is the way we do things today to ensure quality control. And who can argue with success? The system works.

Yet that sure wasn't the way the Jerusalem wall-building project was managed.

There, Crew #1 started and completed an entire section of the wall and its gate. Crew #2 started and completed the next section. And so on, all the way through Crew #42. Why?

Well, what this method unquestionably did was place complete ownership and accountability for the work on each length of wall in clearly identifiable hands.

If there were any problems at the Sheep Gate, you would go to Eliashib. Got concerns about any aspect of the work at the Horse Gate? Talk to the priests. If the mortar wasn't strong at the Water Gate, go talk to the temple servants.

Handing people who may or may not have had much experience in wall building one entire section of the wall - from foundation stones to mortar work to the top level of stone - posed some risks, sure.

But Nehemiah and the others believed that the people of God, tasked with weighty responsibility, could be trusted to do the job right.

They were convinced of the general reliability of people to do what needed to be done if their hearts were in the project.

Over the years of serving as a pastor and seeing the work of God carried out here at Northwest, I'm convinced of the same thing.

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<sup>1</sup> And there was a wide variety of work that needed to be done at each section of the wall. There was new construction (v. 2) and some re-construction work (v. 3, laying beams, hanging doors, covering doors with bolts and bars), work on gates. All the crews did what was necessary at whatever part of the wall they were assigned.

Time and time again, I have seen teens do phenomenal jobs at Basketball Camp and Vacation Bible School and AWANA and Sunday School. I've watched sincere Christians - with no formal training in counseling - pull together in a Care Group setting to nurture and challenge and equip a hurting person to live for Christ.

We've seen ministry events pulled off without a hitch by people whose hearts were in it.

I've seen energized Christians take time, spend money, organize teams and battle adversity to do front line ministry when their hearts were in whatever project they were doing for Jesus.

In fact, I think God often delights to take people with little or no formal training and no special qualifications to accomplish His work. He certainly did that in Jerusalem!

*Best qualified workers?*

In Jerusalem...

Seriously. If you had been an overseer of the project Nehemiah was heading up would you have been thrilled with the workforce that was tasked with the wall-rebuilding venture?

Were the perfumers (v. 8) the best ones to get in on a building project? Did the merchants and goldsmiths (v. 31) have broad experience in heavy construction? Would government officials have been your top choice for hanging gates? Probably not.

So why were these workers used for the work?

Not only because they **wanted** to work, but because, again, God's people can be **trusted** to do what needs to be done with quality when their hearts are in the work. And, based on what we read in the book, they all did a fine job!

This theme of using workers not terribly qualified to accomplish God's work surfaces throughout the Bible.

Jump backward a few centuries and we read about Moses, who REALLY didn't want to lead God's people out of Egypt. He had a speech impediment thing and knew he wasn't up to the task. But God used him and he did all right ( ☺ ).

Or jump forward a few centuries and look at another group of workers that may surprise you. I'm thinking about the men Jesus chose to follow Him.

With Jesus...

If you had been an outside observer, would you have been impressed with the gang of twelve Jesus selected? I doubt it...

My quick analysis of Jesus' first disciples leads me to the following assessments:

- **Simon Peter** - emotionally unstable and given to fits of temper;
- **Andrew** - absolutely no qualities of leadership;
- **James and John**- placed personal interest above loyalty to the cause;
- **Thomas** - demonstrated a negative attitude that undermined morale;
- **Matthew** - poor reputation and questionable integrity (tax collector).

In fact, the only one of the disciples who showed much in the way of potential, who possessed resourcefulness and ability and financial acumen and had friends in high places - was **Judas Iscariot!**

Yet these were the men God used (with the exception of Judas Iscariot!) to turn the world upside down for Christ.

Or consider the members of one of the prominent early churches.

In Corinth...

When Paul wrote to the Christians in the church at Corinth, he wanted to remind them that God was pleased to use weak things to show off His own great strength.

So, in a most unflattering series of remarks, he told these first generation Christians, *[1 Cor. 1:26] For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many WISE according to the flesh, not many MIGHTY, not many NOBLE;*

*[27] but God has chosen the FOOLISH things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the WEAK things of the world to shame the things which are strong, [28] and the BASE things of the world and the DESPISED God has chosen, the things that ARE NOT, so that He may nullify the things that are, [29] so that no man may boast before God.*

I would doubt that the Corinthians wrote a thank you letter to those glowing comments, but what Paul wrote was as true as could be. And we can even see this theme (God chooses and uses the weak) played out today, right here in San Antonio, right here at Northwest Community Church.

### In San Antonio...?

Let's ask each other: Are we the best candidates God could find to fulfill the Great Commission? Did He look through the population and say to Himself, *"These are the people who are best qualified to take My Gospel to San Antonio and to the world. I'll choose them!"*?

I think it's more likely that His thoughts were more along these lines:

*"What people could I find, which, if they actually did carry out my Great Commission mandate, my Son's New Commandment, and the Great Commandment will cause everybody to say, 'Wow, that must be God at work in them, because there's no way THOSE people could have ever pulled off something like that!'"*

God has always used people you'd never dream He'd use for the express reason that His people's weakness showcases His incredible strength and glory.

So, just as He chose that generation of perfumers and priests and merchants and goldsmiths to build the wall in Nehemiah's day, He has chosen us to build the wall in our day.

And when Jesus said, *[Matthew 28:18] "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. [19] "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, [20] teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."* - He was talking to people JUST LIKE YOU AND ME!

We certainly recognize that the Lord could have found better, more apt people to *"make disciples of all the nations"*. But He has decided that it is worth the risk to leave the task to us. When it comes to accomplishing the work of God in 2008, we are "Plan A" - and there is no "Plan B."

So, the third chapter of Nehemiah tells us that we should follow the leanings of our hearts into service (want-to motivation), and that if we want real results we'll honor each other with R-E-S-P-E-C-T.

The final idea I glean from this chapter has to do with leadership. FIRST, notice the leadership role that Nehemiah filled as the work on the wall progressed.

### Leadership Must Lead

#### **Leadership by Disappearance**

Have you noticed that Nehemiah, the instigator of this wall-building project, is never mentioned in this third chapter of his book?<sup>2</sup> Have you every wondered, *"Hey, where's Nehemiah?!"*

In the chapter that records the work itself, he is off the radar. He calls no attention to himself, whatsoever. I find that remarkable. The work is getting done and the leader is invisible.

Hold that thought. I'll come back to it in a minute.

For now, I want to highlight one more thought about leadership, seen clearly in Nehemiah 3. If Nehemiah led by disappearing, others led by demonstration.

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<sup>2</sup> There actually is a "Nehemiah" mentioned in this chapter, but it is a different Nehemiah. *[Nehemiah 3:16] After him Nehemiah the son of Azbuk, official of half the district of Beth-zur, made repairs as far as a point opposite the tombs of David, and as far as the artificial pool and the house of the mighty men.*

## Leadership by Demonstration

### *Sweat equity from the priests*

While not all religious professionals are afraid to get their hands dirty, it is an occupational hazard that many people think that we think that cleanliness really is next to godliness.

We don't, but to be fair, it is not likely that the priesthood of Nehemiah's day was well versed in the ways of construction. That makes what we read at the beginning of the chapter all the more impressive.

***[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.<sup>3</sup>***

The very first work crew mentioned was the one led by the High Priest. All the crew members were priests. This group led well by working hard.

When it was time for sacrifice and offering, they would fulfill their role there. Now it's time to lay bricks and spread mortar - so that is what they did.

### *Sweat equity from the politicians*

Another leader was Malchijah. Introduced in verse 14, Malchijah was the chief official of the district of Beth-haccherem. His task on the wall was to repair the Refuse Gate. Malchijah is my hero.

Despite the fact that he was a government official with an impressive title, he didn't believe that he was somehow "above" the most menial of tasks.

Repairing the Refuse Gate (sometimes called the "Dung Gate" - I wonder why it was called THAT...?) probably wasn't the plum assignment in Jerusalem. But he didn't back away from the work. He led by working, of all places - there.

### *Sweat equity from leaders in the church*

What is clear from the example of the Chief Priests, priests, Levites and government officials, is that leaders are to lead. And chief among the ways that leaders are to lead is by working hard.

It was true in Jerusalem in Nehemiah's day and it is true today in the church. And this comment is directly aimed at the wonderful, godly, servant-leaders in our church.

Here I'm thinking of my fellow Elders. I'm thinking of Deacons and Ministry Coordinators and Committee Chairs and church staff.

You have been placed in leadership.

You may be leading men, music, or missions. You may be leading youth, children, women, or the charge to care for our facilities. You may be leading small groups, working with finances, tasked with preparing the Lord's Supper or teaching a Sunday School class.

Brothers and sisters who lead, follow the lead of the leaders in Jerusalem - and work hard! Once, in writing to church leaders, the apostle Paul said, ***[Romans 12:8]... he who leads, [let him lead] with diligence.***

Your ministry leadership stewardship is your place on the wall. Call the people you are leading. Encourage them. Lovingly hold them accountable. Challenge them. Help them. Do everything you can to see to it that your section of the wall is strong and well built, that it is durable.

I have the utmost respect for the leaders here at Northwest. You are choice women and men. Friends, lead! If our church is going to be all that God has called us to be, it must be led by those who are willing to say, *"Follow me."*

<sup>3</sup> The work of other priests and Levites is recorded at verses 17, 22, and 28. The religious workers were well represented in this work!

I pointed out a minute ago that Nehemiah, the leader, was nowhere to be seen in this chapter. Now I don't think for a moment that he was off somewhere taking a siesta or otherwise goofing off.

My suspicion is that he was playing the role of chief cheerleader, running from place to place and lending aid wherever it was needed.

But the point that is most on my heart to point out here is that he allowed himself to remain in the shadows at the point when his own greatest dream was being realized.

He shows us that it really is amazing how much can be accomplished when the leader doesn't care who gets the credit. Nehemiah was a tremendously catalyzing influence. But he was content to allow others to get the spotlight while he worked hard to bring them to their full potential in the work of God.

He believed with his whole heart that when it comes to the work of God, people are God's methods. And he took an entire chapter to tell us the names of the people who worked.

### **People Are God's Methods**

People have always been God's method.

**Noah** built the ark. **Abraham** walked by faith. **Moses** led God's people. **Deborah** judged Israel. **Solomon** ruled by wisdom. **Peter** preached at Pentecost. **Paul** reached out to Asia Minor with the Gospel. **Priscilla** and **Aquila** teamed up to equip Apollos.

The paraphrase of John 3:16 is true, "*For God so loved the world that He sent NOT a Committee*"

He uses PEOPLE!

We may be tempted to place our emphasis and our confidence in a well-oiled machine and winning programs. But the truth is that God uses people - people like YOU to accomplish His work.

The apostle Paul wrote, [*Ephesians 4:11*] ***And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, [12] for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ***

When a believer sits on the sidelines, everybody loses out - the bench-warming believer AND the work.

But, when a believer jumps into the game (Kingdom work!), everybody benefits - the believer, the work, the other workers and a needy world.

If we are going to become what our Commander-in-Chief has called us to become and if we are going to do what our Commander-in-Chief has given us to do, everyone is needed on the wall!

Are you ready to run to the wall? Are you ready to get off the sidelines and get in the game?