

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

SERMON SERIES: Forward! Together!

(studies in Nehemiah)

Home Stretch

(Nehemiah 6:5-16)

Study #9

Introduction: Leaning for the tape...

When I was in Junior High and High School, I competed on my school's track team. I was never very fast, but I did enjoy running - and the longer the distance the better I performed. Throughout college I jogged occasionally. But upon graduating from college, I put away my running habits for many, many years.

Throughout the early years here in San Antonio, my attention was given to establishing Northwest Community Church and to establishing my family. And honestly, the thought of running rarely entered my mind.

Then, one day in the early 1990's, as I contemplated how UN-fit I had allowed myself to become, I remembered that I used to enjoy running and wondered if running could be a fun way to get back into shape.

I went out and bought running shoes and promptly hit the streets. And running turned out to be a really good thing for me. I got fit. Running relieved stress.

I liked running and began running farther and farther distances. I got into the routine of running regularly and then, just as I was cranking out six and eight miles at a clip, I got the bright idea of running a marathon. I wanted to run one before I reached the age of 40.

I actually ran in three marathons while I was running long distances. All three were memorable. I ran a couple of them as fund-raisers for LeRoy Jacobson and his ministry with Youth for Christ.

For reasons that will become clear, the most memorable was one we called the Cross Marathon. Several people were involved in putting the run together. My plan was to run from the church to Bandera Road out to the 13.1 mile point and then run back to the church.

From the very beginning, I never felt very good on that run. It was warm and muggy on that October morning, which, by the way, is horrible marathon running weather! About mile 18 I knew I was in trouble. That's when the legs cramps hit hard.

Kathy got concerned when I started hallucinating right about the time I got to the H-E-B on Guilbeau. I staggered to the bridge over the flood plain about a mile away from the church and lay down for a few minutes - Kathy wondering if I was going to make it (as in "live" not "finish").

I walked from the bridge almost as far as the light at Guilbeau and Wickersham - where Jackie Jacobson mercifully picked me up and hauled me back to the church. I ran something like 25.5 out of 26.2 miles. Yes, I know all about the agony of defeat.

But then there was that marathon that I finished.

Another fund-raising event, this route was an "out and back" affair. I took off from Hausman Road and Bandera Road in Helotes early on a crisp Fall Saturday morning, ran 13.1 miles out and then turned around to make my way back to the corner of Hausman and Bandera.

I'll never forget that race. The finish line was a great moment, but the last miles were pretty cool. I was feeling good - tired, of course, but realizing that I was going to actually finish a marathon!

Several people joined me from about mile twenty onward. I started feeling stronger as I passed Scenic Loop Road. Friends had gathered at the finish line to greet me. And I made it! One complete marathon! It was GREAT!

Finishing something you have had your eyes set on for a long time will give you a wonderful feeling.

Whether or not it was a marathon, if you can recall a time when you accomplished something you wanted to accomplish (like learned a new skill), finished a project you had tackled (like creating something for your home), or achieved a lofty goal you had set for yourself (learned a new language, improved grades, closed a big deal, kicked a bad habit) - you know what I'm talking about.

Like me, you probably haven't successfully achieved every goal you have set out for yourself. But a victory is sweet, indeed.

And if you can recall successes you've known in life, you know how the Jews of Jerusalem felt when they came to the end of the line in the wall-building work they had undertaken in the days of Nehemiah.

For one hundred and forty years, the city had been littered with rubble, the walls and gates having been destroyed by the Babylonians.

Then, Nehemiah rode into town, fresh from the capitol of the Persian Empire with permission from King Artaxerxes to restore Jerusalem. His contagious vision energized the Jews and they got the job done! What a victory!!

While this morning is not the end of our studies in the book of Nehemiah, we do get to see the completion of the wall building project to the glory of God.

However, before hitting the victory party, we need to watch as the builders need to navigate more enemy interference and opposition.

Last Sunday we began to see the opposition mounted by Israel's enemies.

With the wall-building project well under way, they were taunted with, "You don't have what it takes to do what you want to do for God!". They were threatened with, "We won't let you do what you want to do for God!". They were distracted with, "Nehemiah, join us for a meeting..."

But Nehemiah and the Jews responded with prayer, with prudent protection and with a resounding "NO!!" as appropriate - and the work went on.

But these enemies were, if nothing else, persistent. Having failed at the first three attempts at derailing the workers, they decided to try something a little bit different.

Their new and different tactic consisted of sending another letter. They had already sent four - so clearly, creativity was not the enemies' strong suit.

But this time the letter wasn't sealed in a diplomatic pouch inviting Nehemiah to an important sounding meeting. This time it was an open letter - available for everyone to read. And this letter contained a dangerous accusation.

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

When Accused (6:5-9)

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

[5] Then Sanballat sent his servant to me in the same manner a fifth time with an open letter in his hand. [6] In it was written, "It is reported among the nations, and Gashmu (i.e. - Geshem) says, that you and the Jews are planning to rebel; therefore you are rebuilding the wall. And you are to be their king, according to these reports. [7] You have also appointed prophets to proclaim in Jerusalem concerning you, 'A king is in Judah!' And now it will be reported to the king according to these reports. So come now, let us take counsel together."¹

When Nehemiah came to Jerusalem, he came under the protection and with the good will of the KING of the Persian Empire, Artaxerxes. Palestine, the "state" in which Jerusalem was located, was a province controlled by Persia. Nehemiah came as the leading government official in Palestine and he bore the title "Governor", not "KING."

¹ Remember the relationship that Nehemiah had sustained with Artaxerxes. Would Artaxerxes have believed such a report about Nehemiah?

The accusation that Governor Nehemiah was secretly building a power base to become King Nehemiah put Nehemiah in extreme jeopardy.

Many of us believe that the recent actions of Russia in what she called “the breakaway province of South Ossetia in Georgia” were extreme. But that would be peanuts compared to Artaxerxes’ response if he were to hear that there was a planned revolt in Palestine incited by Nehemiah!

The message of Sanballat’s servant was essentially this:
“Nehemiah, we all know that the real reason for rebuilding the wall is so that you can be protected against the strength of the Persian Empire’s army as it comes against you once you are King. And we are going to tell Artaxerxes, back in Susa...”

If KING Artaxerxes heard these reports and believed them, Nehemiah would have enjoyed a very short term as Palestinian governor! This is a charge of treason - and treason carried the death penalty.

Nehemiah listened as Sanballat’s servant read him the accusing letter and then retreated to a safe place - the **TRUTH**.

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

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

Notice the various things that Nehemiah did NOT do that he might have done.

- He didn’t dignify the charges with a lengthy argument.
- He didn’t bother to bring forth evidence to prove the falseness of the charges.
- He didn’t get into a fight.
- He didn’t beg Sanballat to “please” not let that report get to Artaxerxes.

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

Now, did the accusation throw him for a loop? Did it upset him emotionally?

Hey - if I had been in Nehemiah’s shoes and someone had presented that scenario to me it likely would have sent me reeling.

And in fact, I think Nehemiah *was* rocked by this letter. Pay careful attention to that prayer at the end of verse 9 - **[9b] “But now, O God, strengthen my hands!”**

Why would he pray **“strengthen my hands”** if his hands were not growing weary and getting weak?

I think it very likely that Nehemiah was coming close to being discouraged. Trumped up charges and false accusations can do a number on anybody.

The prayer he prayed tells us that Nehemiah was thinking about throwing in the towel.

He’d been through a lot on this journey to get the walls built. Maybe this - a charge that he was in it for self-advancement - was just too much.

Was he tempted to say, *“It’s not worth it.”? We’ve crashed through enough barriers. I quit!”?*

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

Now I’m not a prophet (or the son of a prophet). But I will say that if you have gotten serious about serving Jesus and haven’t, to this point, been accused of something falsely, it’s probably going to come.

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

And when the accusations fly we can learn so much from Nehemiah! What did he do? He entrusted his reputation to God and kept his hands on the work.

Better yet, make Jesus your example!

When the Apostle Peter was writing to Christians who were routinely being falsely accused and hassled for their faith, he told them to imitate Jesus, who **[1 Peter 2:23]...while being reviled, [He] did not revile in return; while suffering, [He] uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously**

That's how to deal with false charges!

But the enemies were still not finished. The work was close to getting finished and they weren't about to ease up. They still want to stop the work.

Their final attack was aimed directly at Nehemiah.

When Schemed Against (6:10-14)

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

[10] When I entered the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, son of Mehetebel, who was confined at home, he said, 'Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and let us close the doors of the temple, for they are coming to kill you, and they are coming to kill you at night.'²

Shemaiah is playing the part of a good friend here. He's heard a rumor that "they" (Hmmm... - I wonder who "they" are?) are out to get Nehemiah. Shemaiah doesn't want his good friend Nehemiah to be hurt. He's got Nehemiah's best interest at heart in what he recommends. "*Quick, Nehemiah, run with me to the temple!*"

² Shemaiah is functioning as a prophet (cf. 12) - but he is certainly not mentioned anywhere in Scripture besides here as a prophet! Interestingly enough, in verse 7 Sanballat accused Nehemiah of collusion with the prophets, and here a man "prophecies" to bring about Nehemiah's destruction.

The plan makes sense to me. The temple seems like a pretty safe place to flee to. Makes for a good bumper sticker: When in trouble, flee to the temple!

But, as becomes immediately clear, Nehemiah was very uncomfortable with this plan.

An inspired insight (vv. 11-12a)

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

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

On the one hand, it would have been an affront to his position as governor of the Persian state of Palestine to run for his life. It just wouldn't look right.

On the other hand, Nehemiah might have considered it an affront to his dignity as a man to sink to the level of fleeing from his enemies. This gutsy man of God would have rather died with his boots on than flee.

But, neither of those "hands" explains what was really going on when Nehemiah refused Shemaiah's plan.

Refusing to play the pagan's part!

Among the people groups that surrounded Israel in those days, it was a common understanding that their places of worship were places of amnesty. Sanctuaries.

If you were a guilty criminal and were fleet of foot enough to run to a Philistine or Egyptian or Hittite temple, you were safe. Kind of like "home base" in a kids' game!³

But, that use of God's Temple was strictly forbidden for the Jews.

³ The Mosaic Law provided for "cities of refuge" for innocent people fleeing from an avenger who wanted to kill them for an alleged wrong.

[Exodus 21:14] If...a man acts presumptuously toward his neighbor, so as to kill him craftily, you are to take him even from My altar, that he may die.”⁴

The Temple was not a place where a person could feel safe to flee in times of danger.

Moreover, Nehemiah was not a Levite. He was not a priest. And Shemaiah was inviting him, a non-Levite, to go inside the temple, the symbolic location of the presence of God in ancient Israel. And the Bible was explicit that a non-Levitical priest was never to set foot in the Temple’s holy places.⁵

So, Shemaiah’s suggestion might have made sense - EXCEPT THAT IT VIOLATED THE EXPLICIT TEACHING OF THE WORD OF GOD!⁶

At first blush it appeared that Nehemiah didn’t like Shemaiah’s plan because it offended his macho, swash-buckling style. After some digging, though, we discover that he didn’t follow Shemaiah into the Temple because to have done so would have been sinful.

How did he know it would have been sinful? Because he knew his Bible! Nehemiah gained an insight about Shemaiah’s plan that is both profound and fascinating.

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

How did Nehemiah perceive that God had not sent Shemaiah? Because Shemaiah’s advice encouraged him to do something that was forbidden in the Bible!

⁴ In fact, 1 Kings 1:50-53 is a direct application of Exodus 21, as it records the actions of King Solomon. He took a man named Adonijah from the altar itself rather than allow Adonijah to continue to find amnesty there! Adonijah certainly discovered that the Temple was not a reliable place to seek safety!

⁵ There were outer courts for both the Tabernacle and Temple that were places where the non-Levite could go. But the language Shemaiah uses here speaks of entering into the structure itself (not an outer, outside court) - and that would have been forbidden.

⁶ Among the passages with this prohibition would be Numbers 1:50-51 and 17:13.

You who are involved in serving Jesus have no better safeguard against sin than a growing, working knowledge of and application of the Bible.

This is one of the chief reasons why it is so important that we be a church grounded in Scripture and that you be a person grounded in Scripture.

Had Nehemiah not known those obscure passages in Exodus and Numbers he might have unwittingly fled to the Temple.

Had he done so, he would have been guilty of sin against God AND he would have brought himself and the whole work of rebuilding the wall into reproach!

Nehemiah was protected from sin because he was a person of the Book. And, we will have the same protection if we learn to saturate our minds with the Bible’s instructions and counsels. God wants YOU to be a person of the Book!

After Nehemiah came to realize that Shemaiah’s prophecy was bogus, his suspicions were proven true about what it was Shemaiah had been trying to accomplish.

A sinister suggestion (vv. 12b-14)

[12b] ...but he uttered his prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. [13] He was hired for this reason, that I might become frightened and act accordingly and sin, so that they might have an evil report in order that they could reproach me. [14] Remember, O my God, Tobiah and Sanballat according to these works of theirs, and also Noadiah the prophetess and the rest of the prophets who were trying to frighten me.”

The purpose of their plot was not to kill him (as Shemaiah had said), but to publicly humiliate him. The enemies wanted to trick him through fear into a compromise of his integrity.

In all the ploys they have tried, the enemies have known exactly what they were doing. Even though they rejected God and the life of faith, they understood it! These attacks have been sheer strokes of genius.

In fact, it all should have worked perfectly, and it would have, too - except for one factor. The downfall of their plot was the faith of the Jews.

They didn't figure on Nehemiah and the people of God placing their trust in God! They didn't envision the strength that comes when believers walk in integrity. They hadn't reckoned with the possibility that Nehemiah and company might just put their fears on hold, and instead, look to God in faith!

But, that is exactly what they did - and so the work never missed a beat. To review...

Review

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

And after all of this, and after Nehemiah's long trip from Persia and his night time reconnaissance and his vision-casting, and after the people had willingly put their hands to the good work and made significant sacrifices - the job got done!

Mission: Accomplished! (6:15-16)

(at least, Phase One...)

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

Fifty Two Days (then)

While the work of restoring Jerusalem is not yet over (we still have chapters 7-13 in front of us!), yet today we see the initial project - WALL-BUILDING - finished to the glory of God.

Opposition was ignored, defeated, overcome. Energized people rose to the occasion and gained victory over a dismal *status quo*.

And they did it in **fifty two days**. Wow!

Fifty two days is a pretty brief period of time, considering that the walls had been broken down for one hundred and forty years.

Fifty Two Days (now)

By the way, did you know that, with a count starting tomorrow, there are exactly **fifty two days** until Thanksgiving? Or, with a count starting today, there are **fifty two days** until our annual Thanksgiving Eve worship service?

I wonder what we - the people of God at Northwest Community Church - could do in **fifty two days** to advance the Kingdom of God? I wonder what the Lord might do in and through and with our church if, over the next **fifty two days**, we all rushed to the wall...

In Nehemiah's Jerusalem there were lots of opportunities for the Jews to be involved in wall building and gate construction.

Today, there are lots of opportunities for Christians to be involved in Kingdom building. There are lots of open spaces on the walls where your contribution would advance God's work.

Here are some places on the wall that just might be a perfect fit for you.

- You could look for ways to serve in the formal structure of the church's ministry:
 - Call Judy Blake and find out about the needs in the Children's Ministry with Sunday School - and volunteer to be a teacher or a helper.
 - The Nursery can always use the presence of loving servants to care for the littlest among us. Call the church office for details.
 - Call any of the Deacons and offer assistance in caring for the church property - the mowable yard, the twelve acres, and the facilities.
 - Speak with Michael O'Brien about serving on the Praise Team as an instrumentalist or as a vocalist.
 - Talk with Charlie Laughlin about helping with audio/visual or with Chris Addington about helping with computer technology.
 - Give Todd Havekost a call and find out about service opportunities with the Missions Committee
 - Give me a call and we can talk about how to become involved in the Local Outreach ministry.
 - Call Ben and Melissa Smith and ask if there are opportunities to help with our ministry to teens. (I know that we are looking for someone to spend a week next summer with our teens in New Orleans.)
 - Call Kelly Blake and see if just maybe there might be a need for additional serving hands at AWANA on Wednesday evenings.
 - Call Michael Chandler and volunteer to be a Community Blend servant.
 - Call Rhonda Olson and find out if she needs help with the Benevolence Food Pantry.
 - You could contribute to Operation Christmas Child, involving your family in this effort, creating a Christ-centered, service-oriented home.
- And you could also serve on walls that are outside the formal structure of the church.
 - You could invite your friends to experience the warmth and the touch of God that you've experienced here. Invite them to a worship service, a Sunday School class, a Care Group, or their kids to AWANA or to Love and Guts.
 - Your place on the wall might be to share the Good News with a friend who has never understood that God sent His only Son, Jesus, to die for the sins of the world - and that by trusting in Him and Him alone, your friend could have eternal life.

- You could contribute financially to our church's ministry. If you are benefiting from the ministry here, it is only right that you give of your treasure to support the increasing financial needs we have - and trust me, not only does generosity multiply ministry, but JOY follows generosity!
- You could pray - and take on prayer as the particular ministry to which you are called for the advance of our ministries over the next **fifty two days**.

Now of course with that list I've only scratched the surface. There are as many ways to rush to the wall as there are people in our church.

If you are fully deployed in wall-building, I'm not asking you to do more. Some of you are busier than you should be with church involvement. I am speaking, though, to each Christian who is not employing his or her ministry gifts. And I'm challenging YOU to rush to the wall.

If you have been going through exceptionally deep waters in recent days - and I know many of you have - I want you to experience the rest you need. If life has afflicted you, you need God's comfort and peace. And that is what I hope you find here.

But if you are comfortable, you may need God's affliction! I want you to be UNcomfortable not serving. By your service, God's Kingdom advances. And in your service, you come to know the Lord! Regardless of your age, your station in life, your frailty - your contribution is vital. The Lord wants you on the wall.

If EVERYBODY at Northwest were to run to the wall, what a wonderful worshipping, loving, evangelizing transformation the Holy Spirit would bring our way to His own glory!

And what a thrilling Thanksgiving Eve service we would enjoy. On the occasion of my only successful marathon effort, there was great celebration and joy over a victory! That was nothing but a run.

Imagine the thrill we will enjoy on November 26th as we share the victories with each other with which the Lord has blessed us between now and those intervening **fifty two days**, because, like Nehemiah and the Jews of his day, we have put our hands to the good work.