

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

SERMON SERIES: Forward! Together!

(studies in Nehemiah)

Finished! - and the work continues

(Nehemiah 6:15--7:73)

Study #10

Introduction: And after that...

It was the winter of 1976. I had gone with a few college friends on a snow-skiing trip to the Colorado Rocky Mountain ski area of Crested Butte. One evening during this trip, I found myself hitch-hiking the thirty miles or so from the city of Gunnison back to Crested Butte.

It was pretty cold that night, and I needed a ride. So, you can imagine how thrilled I was when I was picked up by a couple of high school guys driving a Blazer.

Upon entering their vehicle I immediately focused in on two facts. One, the road was very icy and curvy, and would require alertness and skill behind the wheel. Two, these two High Schoolers were smoking marijuana.

So, I did what you would have done. I decided that evangelism was the need of the hour!

I began by asking them about themselves, and they were more than willing to talk. After hearing about what a great time they were having in High School, I asked them, "What do you plan on doing after High School?"

They told me that they planned on going to college. We talked about that for a while and then I asked them, "What do you plan on doing after college?"

Well, they had career plans, and described what they intended to do, professionally. Again, I asked, "Great. What are you going to do after you finish with your career?"

A little confused, they told me that they figured they would work till they were in their sixties, and then retire and take it easy!

I pressed them again, "Great plan. What are you going to do after your retirement?" By this time the air in the Blazer had cleared somewhat and they were with me.

They responded, together, "Well, I guess we'll die!" to which I responded, "What are you going to do after you die?"

That led to an opportunity for me to share the Gospel with these two guys. I told them that this life, and all of its pursuits, is preparatory to the life to come. I told them that Jesus Christ died and rose again so that they could be forgiven of their sins, might have life abundantly here and now and could have life with God forever.

They didn't put their trust in Christ on that day. But they did drop me off at the appropriate location - safe and sound - and I did pray that God would get them safely to their FINAL destination.

As I explained on that snowy night in Colorado, life is arranged so that one thing flows to another. Generally speaking childhood leads to adolescence leads to adulthood leads to increasing responsibility leads to retirement leads to death - leads to eternity.

In this life, we are never "finished." Nothing is ever all wrapped up, nice and neat. We finish one thing only to graduate to another. Conclusions lead to new beginnings. Climbs that lead to plateaus only lead to steeper climbs later on.

That is true in your life and mine. And that was true twenty five hundred years ago in Nehemiah's Jerusalem.

Just because the walls and gates were in place at the end of fifty two days of construction didn't mean that the WORK was finished. And today, we watch the CONTINUING work of the people of God as we return to Nehemiah.

Review of Nehemiah

We began our study of the Old Testament book of Nehemiah back in August. And since we've been away from Nehemiah for a couple of weeks, it might be a good idea to review, if only briefly.

This book describes the actions of Nehemiah, a Jew who was serving in the palace of the Persian king, Artaxerxes, in the 5th century BC.

When Nehemiah's brother, Hanani, came from Jerusalem to visit, he told Nehemiah that the city of Jerusalem - the hometown of every Jew - was still in pitiful shape one hundred and forty years after it had been destroyed by the Babylonians.¹

The book traces Nehemiah's travels to Jerusalem, his rebuilding of the city's broken down walls and his work of restoring the city to spiritual health.

It is an amazing story. Less than a year after his brother Hanani had told him that the wall was broken down,² the city was in ruins, and the people were in reproach, we read,

¹ Which had taken place in 586 BC.

² Nehemiah had first learned that the people living there were in distress, the walls around the city were in ruins and that its gates were burned with fire in the 20th year of the reign of King Artaxerxes. Following this discovery, at about this (December) time of year, Nehemiah committed to fervent prayer on behalf of the Jews in Jerusalem. That season of prayer lasted for four months (from Chislev until Nissan; for us, from December through March). Following those four months of prayer, in the month Nissan (March/April), standing before the most powerful ruler in the world (Artaxerxes of the Persian Empire), Nehemiah asked for permission to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the city and the walls around the city. When he finally arrived in Jerusalem, it was probably sometime in late June. Work on the wall began in the middle of the Jewish month of Ab (our July). Chapter 4 told us that at this time, Judah was experiencing a drought and a famine! So, the work was accomplished in the middle of a Palestinian famine, in the simmering heat of the summer!

Finished! The Walls and Gates are UP!! Glory to God! (6:15-16)

God's People Get the Job Done! (v. 15)

[15] So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of the month Elul, in fifty-two days.³

WOW! In ruins for a century and a half - and rebuilt in a month and a half. If nothing else, the Bible is telling us that when the hearts of God's people are in it, it just doesn't take that long to turn things around.

According to Nehemiah, a group of merchants, priests and perfumers can rebuild a broken down wall in fifty two days. According to the New Testament, a few Christian disciples in the first century "turned the world upside down" for Christ in less than a generation.⁴

But we live in the twenty-first century (in case you didn't think I knew...). Could similar quick turnarounds occur today?

- Could a family torn apart by strife be restored - and quickly - through repentance and forgiveness and love?
- Might a neighborhood filled with isolated people be seriously impacted - within months - through hospitality and friendship and caring?
- Could a church be revived, revolutionized - in fifty two days - to become a light to its community, a source of hope for the hopeless by means of prayer, willingness, love, spiritual sensitivity, and faith?

³ How was it built so quickly? First, remember that the work was primarily reconstruction, and not new construction. So, almost all of the raw materials for building were right there on the job site. Second, there were dangers all around, supplying lots and lots of motivation to the workers to finish in a hurry! Third, archaeologists have determined that the total length of the wall was probably no more than three miles all around. So, it is not as if they were having to build a wall around San Antonio or some truly gargantuan metropolis. Fourth, (and a little embarrassing) recent excavations done on the old east wall have revealed that the construction was probably done rather hastily and sloppily. And fifth, the inhabitants of Jerusalem had help during the building from the residents of Jericho, Tekoa, Gibeon, and Mizpah (see chapter 3).

⁴ Acts 17:6 - *When they did not find them, they began dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities, shouting, "These men who have upset the world have come here also"*

Three Sundays ago, I noted that it took fifty two days for the Jews of Jerusalem to rebuild the walls around the city and that they did it by embracing the ethos, “*Everybody on the wall!*”

I also noted that there were exactly fifty two days between that Sunday and our Thanksgiving Eve worship service. (November 26th)

I asked on that Sunday, “*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...*”

Let me ask you: What have you thought about, prayed about, and considered over the past couple of weeks regarding your place on the wall? What have you done, who have you spoken with, what steps have you taken toward the wall since October 5th?

Friends, I am completely PUMPED about what God might do if each one of us were serious about working on the wall God has put before us - the wall of serving Jesus here at church and in our community! (I’ll have more to say about that in a few minutes.)

So, the wall project is completed to the glory of God - and the conclusion of the wall re-building project affected more than the workers. It deeply impacted those who had opposed the project, too!

The Enemies Get the Point and God Gets the Credit! (v. 16)

[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.

What we have here is a defeated, deflated enemy! Yes, of course the Jews had worked hard. But, ultimately, behind it all, the enemies of the project understood that God was behind its success. And, of course that explains why they lost confidence.

They saw that they were not just fighting Nehemiah and a bunch of malcontent Jews! They were battling God.

And THIS is what we want! We want to be involved in something so audacious, so ginormous, that when it is done, everyone will stand back and say, “*They did this with the help of their God!*”

I’m talking about God-sized things like -

- People coming to Christ!
- Families being restored!
- People out of work finding groceries on their front porch!
- Children nurtured!
- Missionaries sent and supported!
- Youth going to school to proclaim Jesus!

And these kinds of God-sized works happen when “*everybody rushes to the wall.*”

Ecclesiastes 7:8 says, “***The end of a matter is better than its beginning.***” And the end of this matter is lip-smacking, mouth-watering, sweet-tasting VICTORY!

We can only imagine the feelings of excitement and (yes) *relief* that must have been running through the city as the last rock was set in the wall and the last lock was placed on the last gate.

But the end of construction doesn’t mark the end of the book. We’re only half way through Nehemiah.

And in what we read next, we discover weak spots. Not weak spots in the wall. Weak spots in the builders.

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

Foreshadowing - trouble ahead! (6:17-19)

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

Now Tobiah's name might be familiar to you if you've been here for much of our study in the book of Nehemiah. Tobiah had been one of the chief enemies of the work from the very beginning.

In Nehemiah 2:19, Tobiah mocked the Jews when he found out that they intended to rebuild the walls. In 4:3, he mocked their initial wall-building efforts. Then, in 6:12, we learned that Tobiah had hired Shemaiah to incite Nehemiah to sin by fleeing to the Temple out of fear.

It is not overstatement to say that Tobiah was among the most dangerous of the Jews' enemies and one of the most serious opponents both of the WORK and the GOD of the Jews.

Now (6:17-19) we discover that prominent Jews in Jerusalem were bound to Tobiah by marriage. And these leaders were corresponding with Tobiah *"in those days."*

In what days? In the days of the completion of the wall around the city!

Have you got that? While that last gate was being set in place, and the last stone was being mortared into place, Jewish leaders in Jerusalem were carrying on correspondence with Tobiah, the Ammonite, the enemy.⁵

These nobles were (to use an old but very appropriate word) hypocrites. They had two faces.

⁵ There aren't many Ammonites around today, so maybe it would be helpful for me to give you a broad birds'-eye view of the Ammonites from the Old Testament. The Ammonites were ethnically related to the Jews. In fact, the father of the Ammonite tribe was Abraham's nephew, Lot, and you can read the very sordid story of Ammon's birth in Genesis 19. Because of their near relation to Abraham, the Jews were commanded in Deuteronomy 2 to treat the Ammonites kindly. But, the Ammonites very quickly gave God cause to change that command when they allied themselves with the false prophet, Balaam, in Deuteronomy 23. At that point, a curse was placed on the Ammonites. From then on, they fought against Israel (see Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, and 1 & 2 Kings) at every opportunity. Talk about bad influences!! In 1 Kings 11, we discover that King Solomon married some Ammonite women, who introduced him to the practice of sacrificing his children by burning them in fire. Also, throughout the prophets (most notably Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, and Zephaniah), the Ammonites were roundly condemned.

On the one hand, to make themselves acceptable to Nehemiah, they had presented as cheerleaders for the wall-building project. **On the other hand**, they were disobeying clear commands from God, befriending Tobiah, and intermarrying with his family!⁶

If I had been writing Nehemiah, I would have stopped at verse 16. I might have just signed off. End of book. Wall is built. Over and out.

But not Nehemiah. No. He had to include the ugliness of the Jews' intermarriage with Tobiah's family and the ongoing influence of Tobiah.

WHY?

It just disrupts a perfectly serene and idyllic picture of God's people enjoying a victory! Why can't we have just a few minutes to bask in the rarified air of triumph?

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

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

That is what Nehemiah is doing here. He is warning us. He is alerting us to trouble ahead.

But he's not just warning us of the troubles that are in the offing with Tobiah (which indeed will arise in chapter 13), but the troubles that are ahead whenever we undertake a major effort for the Lord.

If you and I undertake major efforts to serve the Lord Jesus Christ here in San Antonio and around the world, there will be trouble.

- If we get increasingly serious about serving people in Jesus' Name who are battling addictions, there will be trouble.

⁶ Remember that Ezra the scribe had forbidden intermarriage between the Ammonites and the Israelites once they had come back from captivity to inhabit the land of Palestine. (see Ezra 9 and 10)

- If we become more passionate about welcoming people and loving people who are ethnically, culturally, economically, politically diverse, things might get messy.
- If we become more committed to loving boldly, exposing darkness, and attacking sin (not sinners!), trouble won't be far off.
- If we become an evangelizing, Jesus-sharing, witnessing FORCE, there might be trouble.
- If you get serious about using your money to fund advances for the Kingdom of God, you might face trouble.

To be forewarned is to be forearmed. But to be forewarned is **NOT** an invitation to retreat. It is to move to the wall with eyes wide open to the fact that just because the wall is finished doesn't mean that the work is done!

In Jerusalem the walls are up - and the work continues. And we read the record of the continuing work as we turn to chapter 7 of Nehemiah.

The first phrase of the first verse reminds us of the great victory of chapter 6. Now we discover that Nehemiah put in place an infrastructure to support a spiritual revival that would last for the long haul.

Consolidating Gains (7:1-4)

Worship leaders for the city (v. 1)

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

As the governor of the province, Nehemiah saw to it that those who would musically lead in community worship were identified and set apart. This wasn't hard for Nehemiah to make happen. He was the governor. He **appointed** the appropriate people to do their jobs.

Next, he filled the civic leadership posts with quality people.

Godly leaders for the city (v. 2)

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

We met Hanani at the very beginning of our book. He was the one who, along with others from Jerusalem, let Nehemiah know about the shameful condition of the city. No doubt, he was a godly man who could be trusted with leadership responsibilities.

And we are introduced to Hananiah, who was to share leadership with Hanani. These men both possessed unimpeachable character and had in common a reverence for God that surpassed any fear they might have had of man.

These are the kinds of people you want to have in city leadership! And Nehemiah, the Persian governor of the province, appointed these two sharp men to these posts.

Next, we read about Nehemiah taking measures to ensure that the city was protected from troublemakers. (See, there really was more work.)

Protection for the city (v. 3)

Guarding wall and gates (v. 3a)

[3a] Then I said to them, "Do not let the gates of Jerusalem be opened until the sun is hot, and while they are standing guard, let them shut and bolt the doors."

The first instinct of the city's merchants, of course, since the walls were up and the city was looking respectable again, would have been to open the gates as soon as it was light!

Especially with the recent renovation of the city, don't you imagine that they would have wanted to take advantage of the situation for increased sales?

Nehemiah says, *"Not so fast!"*

He commanded that the shopkeepers wait until the sun was high in the sky before opening the city gates. Wait until it is safe. Safety and security are more important than increased sales.

And personal residences, too, were to be closely guarded.

Protecting personal residences (v. 3b)

[3b] "...Also appoint guards from the inhabitants of Jerusalem, each at his post, and each in front of his own house."

This is pretty much martial law! Everything is tightly locked down here at the initial stages of Jerusalem's rebuilding. Attacks from enemies are imminent and expected. Vigilance is the price to be paid for the privilege of continued liberty and of hoped for revival.

So, worship leaders are in place. Godly leadership is in place. And safety precautions are in place. Does that mean everything is all good in Jerusalem? Well, not exactly.

Verse 4 tells us that there is still this one little problem that needs to be addressed.

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

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

As important as it is that there not be overcrowding, this is ridiculous. The one thing that every great, world-class city must have is people! And the one thing that Jerusalem was missing was - people.

How do you fix the problem of underpopulation? Well, I'll show you what Nehemiah did.

He made a brilliant editorial move. Faced with the prospect of needing to repopulate Jerusalem, he spent **sixty eight** verses listing hopelessly unpronounceable Jewish names. Sounds like a great idea to me. How about you?

Standing on Giants' Shoulders (7:5-73)

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

[5] Then my God put it into my heart⁷ to assemble the nobles, the officials and the people to be enrolled by genealogies. Then I found the book of the genealogy of those who came up first in which I found the following record: [6] These are the people of the province who came up from the captivity of the exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away, and who returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his city

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

And with them all arranged by their families, he dredged up a genealogy recorded in the book of Ezra. I'm sure that he read this genealogy out loud.

Listing Ancestors (vv. 7-7)

I have decided to NOT READ verses 6-73 out loud (whew!). But you and I do need to understand what the list is before we understand why it was included.

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

An outline of the list

- Verses 7-38 list the heads of households, either by name or location;
- Verses 39-45 list the priests and Levites;
- Verses 46-60 list the (non-Levitical) temple servants and the sons of Solomon's servants (evidently a semi-official group of royal servants);
- Verses 61-65 record the names of those who could not prove their ancestry. Some, whether or not they were priests, and others whether or not they were even Jews;

⁷ And it turns out that this wasn't Nehemiah's idea. It was God who laid the idea on Nehemiah's heart.

- Verses 66-69 record the number of domesticated animals that came back from Babylon to Jerusalem;
- And, finally, verses 70-72 tell us how much money was collected from the people for the support of the work of rebuilding the city.

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

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

Nehemiah chose to include this list of names for a reason. And God knew that 2500 years later, you and I would be studying Nehemiah 7. He made sure that they were included for our benefit, too.⁸

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

Seventy years after the Jews had been defeated by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians, many of the displaced Jews returned to Jerusalem with a leader named Zerubbabel.

The verses in Nehemiah, chapter 7 (which are virtually identical to Ezra 2:2-70⁹) record the names of those who came back.

That’s right. These verses that we are trying to avoid reading contain the names of the heroes who returned from well-established lives in Persia to repopulate and re-establish the devastated city of Jerusalem to the glory of God.

⁸ 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.*

⁹ There are, admittedly, a couple of discrepancies between Ezra’s list and that of Nehemiah 2. And, several attempts at harmonization have been offered to explain these differences. In my opinion, the best suggestion is that there were mistakes made by the copyists of the lists (not mistakes in the originals). If we don’t say this, then we are left with the sad conclusion that neither Nehemiah nor Ezra knew how to add, since neither list adds up to 42,360! Equally probable is the assumption that the two lists have different focal points for the totals (for instance, perhaps Ezra records those who left Babylon for Jerusalem; Nehemiah might list those who actually made it.)

Now if you had been a Jew living in Nehemiah’s Israel, somewhere outside the city of Jerusalem, what would have been the impact of reading this list?

I’ll tell you what I think. I think that you would have been thinking,

“Seventy years ago, great-great grandpa Jeshua (or Azariah, or Mordecai) came back to Jerusalem from a far away place (Persia) to find a Jerusalem in much worse shape that it is today. And, you know, if he and my great-great grandma did THAT, then, I suppose I could heed Nehemiah’s call and head to Jerusalem, too.”

By letting his contemporaries see that they we descendants of those heroes, Nehemiah is telling them that such courage is in their DNA. He is inviting them to imitate their forefathers’ faith and do the same - move to Jerusalem!

Pastor Chuck Swindoll tells the story of his family traveling to the East Coast one year to the see the sights during a summer vacation. When they were in Arlington, Virginia, they drove past Arlington National Cemetery. The Swindoll’s oldest son asked what it was. What did all the white crosses mean?

Choking back tears, the Marine veteran Swindoll told his son that Arlington Cemetery was full of the bodies of men and women who had given their lives for our freedom.

And, that is what Nehemiah 7:6-73 is. It is God’s Arlington Cemetery.

These are the people who came to Jerusalem at the risk of their lives, suffered and sweat through hardship, and endured great loss. They were the heroes who laid the foundation for the work accomplished in Nehemiah 6, the giant shoulders upon which Nehemiah and the Jews had stood, to rebuild the walls!

And they are the cloud of witnesses who now call Nehemiah’s generation to the great task before them and say, *“Finish the job! Repopulate Jerusalem. Make it a city on a hill that shines for God.”*

And I am willing to wager that when the Jews heard Nehemiah read verses 6-73, they were encouraged to continue to imitate the courageous, sacrificial, faithful actions of their forefathers.

I say that because I am encouraged to walk with God as I look down at the shoulders of the giants who are holding me up! That's right. You and I stand on the shoulders of giants, too!

Many of the giants who have helped us are found in the pages of the Bible. That's why so much of the Bible is narrative history! The stories of Scripture are included not to entertain, but to fire our imaginations to imitate the faith of our fathers.

When we read the story of Abraham, we are not merely reading the record of a man who was willing to sacrifice his son, Isaac. We are reading an invitation from God to imitate his go-for-broke, risk everything kind of faith.

When we read Mary's response to the angels' announcement that she was going to give birth to a Baby, we are not just to admire her faith. We are to imitate her, by saying to the Lord, "***Behold the bondslave of the Lord; may it be done to me according to Your word.***" (Luke 1:38)

And when we read the book of Nehemiah we are not simply reading the record of a man who led an effort to rebuild a wall around a city. We are hearing God's invitation - "*Everybody on the wall!*"

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

We are also standing on the shoulders of Christians who, over the past twenty centuries, have successfully navigated every problem we are facing today.¹⁰

AND we are standing on the shoulders of those who have personally invested in us, poured their lives into us, disciplined us, prayed for us, taught us, modeled Christlikeness for us.

That would be:

- The person who led you to Christ.
- The one who taught you to study the Bible.
- The example of flaming evangelism.
- The model of integrity.
- The one who showed you what a love for Scripture could do in a life.
- The person who exemplified the compassion of Jesus at a time when you were needy.

These heroes upon whose shoulders you stand are calling you to reach forward, run to the wall and serve Jesus today. They are a part of the "***cloud of witnesses***" (Hebrews 11:1) the book of Hebrews talks about who are cheering us on as we run the race for Jesus.

Let this be the season of your life during which you take full advantage of the lofty height on which you stand because of the labors of others. Let this be the time when you climb higher, reach farther, for Jesus.

Nehemiah was calling the people of his day to "imitation faith." So you and I are also called to "imitation faith" today. Imitate the faith of those who have gone before.

So, one part of the great work of God is done. Great! But the work is not finished! It is still your time and my time to rush to the wall. They did it. We are called to do it, too!

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

¹⁰ One of the magazines I have enjoyed in the past is a publication called Christian History, published by Christianity Today. Each quarterly issue takes the reader back in time to explore the events, movements, and people, that shaped God's work in the past. I would consider this a wonderful resource for anyone who wants to discover more about their Christian "roots" and learn more about the men and women upon whose shoulders they stand.