

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

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

(studies in Nehemiah)

## **A Worship Service to Remember**

(Nehemiah 11-12)

Study #14

### **Introduction: Manures we have known and loved...**

(Warning: This may be the most indelicate opening to a sermon you've ever heard...)

Many years ago, our family took a trip to visit Kathy's grandfather's dairy farm in Ohio. At the time we visited, ol' Leslie Jagers was no longer farming. But he still lived on the farm and was glad to have his Texas granddaughter and his great grandchildren up for a visit.

I recall being fascinated by this trip to the farm. The ancient farm machinery was amazing - and so was the old barn. This barn had been built by Les Jagers and his neighbors a half century earlier. And, since he was a dairy farmer, there were stanchions and stalls for the cows he used to keep.

At milking time, the cows would be herded into the barn, lining up ten or fifteen side by side, with the two rows of cows facing each other, head to head.

But there was another feature of the barn that I found most interesting. Conveniently located near the south end of each one of the cows who stood to be milked was a six inch deep, foot and a half wide trench in the concrete.

It was when I noticed this trench that I realized what an efficient farmer Kathy's grandfather had been. He used everything the cows would give him. And I mean everything - milk and otherwise.

The "otherwise" dropped neatly into the trench. He would haul this "otherwise" out of the barn to his fields and spread it on thick as a fertilizer. Referred to as "manuring," this process prepared the fields on his farm to produce extra fine crops.

Manuring a field is a time-honored exercise for smart farmers. Manuring (and fertilizing, generally) adds nutrients and organic material to the soil, helps the soil retain moisture, and feeds tender crops.

It is soil preparation. There will be a better harvest if the farmer prepares his fields in advance.

Manuring provides a graphic mental picture of what needs to happen if we, God's people, are to become the worshipping and serving people we have been redeemed to become.

Some manures are laid on our lives. It happens. Sicknesses and accidents and broken relationships are all manures God can use to mold our character and to prompt us to trust Him. No doubt you have experienced some of these manures in your own life, as have I.

And sometimes we self-manure. We prepare our own hearts through deep and rich fellowship with others who are on the same faith journey we are on. We open the Bible and read, accepting it for the Word of God it is. We pray diligently, finding intimacy with God as we do.

Over the past several weeks on Sunday mornings, we have watched as the Jews of Nehemiah's Jerusalem have been prepping to be the people God redeemed them to be. Some manure was dropped on them. Some manure deepened and enriched their souls as they applied it to themselves.

Today we come to the high point in our study of Nehemiah. (Yes, I know there is another chapter. We'll wrap up next Sunday, Lord willing, reminding ourselves that well, we are not in Heaven yet...) We watch a crop of exuberant worship erupt as the result of all the soil prep that has gone on SINCE the wall rebuilding project wrapped up.

Our study in Nehemiah began back in August. It's been a good ride - a ride that will conclude next Sunday. And throughout our study we have seen this man, Nehemiah, whose vision brought about dramatic change for the people of God in his day. From day one, we:

- saw Nehemiah's burden for Jerusalem;
- watched him travel from the winter palace of the Persian Empire in Susa to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall;
- listened to him rally the residents of Jerusalem to join him in the work;
- admired his administrative ability;
- stood in awe as he pressed on through opposition - from within and from without; and
- rejoiced to see the work finished in fifty two days!

After a century and a half of reproach, the wall was rebuilt in a month and a half!

And then we realized that the entire effort of building that wall was only Phase I of a two phase project. The real point of it all was spiritual renewal, a renewal that wouldn't have taken place without the outer protection of a wall.

And since the completion of the wall, the people have turned their attention to the Bible. (chapter 8) That's when the winds of revival first began to blow.

They found in the Bible that they were to observe the Feast of Tabernacles by living in tents for a week. And they got healthier, spiritually speaking, as they actually did this.

The winds kept blowing and they kept getting healthier as they confessed their sins to God. (chapter 9)

And not content to simply confess, they made specific promises to God, publicly promising that they would turn their behavior around in the areas in which they had been so remiss - with respect to marriage, Sabbath-keeping, and finances. (chapter 10)

I hope that over these last several weeks you have been journeying with the Jews. I hope that you have tasted revival as you have re-Bibled, that you have gotten honest with God about your sin, and that, convicted of your sin, you have made promises to God to obey and to serve Jesus.

I hope that you have traveled with the Jews **for the sake of the health of your soul**, because taking those kinds of steps - paying attention to Scripture, honest confession, promise-making - are giant steps on the road to maturity.

And, I hope you have done so **for the sake of the progress of this church**, because a church made up of Christians who pay attention to the Bible, confess their sins and make serious promises to God is poised to make some serious impact for Jesus!

AND, I hope you have been tracking with the Jews of Nehemiah for the sake of your enjoyment of this morning's time in God's Word.

As we saw last Sunday, the first two verses of Nehemiah 11 praise volunteers. The focus is on those wonderful men and women who agreed to move to Jerusalem, a city on the mend, a city with a glorious past and a hopefully (but not at all a guaranteed) bright future.

These heroic families moved to Jerusalem NOT because the Bible told them to, but because their hearts yearned to make a difference for God's Kingdom. Just as you who serve Jesus today, or you who have signed "the wall" have done so because you want to make a difference for Jesus.

Today, having seen all that we've seen, we are witnesses to praise and honor. The second scene of praise and honor is far more important than the first as it is a service of praise and honor to God. But the first praise and honor focus is not insignificant, as it gives us a roll call of unsung heroes.

I am going to take just a moment or two to tell you something about these names. I'm going to do it quickly. And then, arising out of an understanding of these names, I'm going to suggest an application assignment.

### **In Praise of Unsung Heroes (11:3--12:26)**

In verses 3-24 of chapter 11, Nehemiah gives us the names of those people who actually lived in Jerusalem. These folks are the descendants of Judah and Benjamin (vv. 3-9), the priests and Levites (vv. 10-18) and the gatekeepers and civic leaders (vv. 19-24) in Jerusalem.

Then, in verses 25-36 we read about some of those who continued to live in the outlying areas. These folks did not move to Jerusalem. They did, however, contribute to the nation's progress through their faithful service to God where they had always lived.

The twelfth chapter begins by naming the priests and other leaders who had returned to Palestine with Zerubbabel - and this was seventy years before Ezra returned and about eighty five years before Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem - to re-build the Temple.

Then, from verses 12-26, Nehemiah listed the descendants of those pioneers who were serving God at the time he wrote.<sup>1</sup>

Now, why did Nehemiah list these names in the permanent record? Very simply, he wanted to say "thanks" to trailblazers and to express gratitude to those who had paved the way for the current and future success of the nation.

He and all the people with him were standing on the peak of success because they stood on the shoulders of the giants who had come before them. This record of their names honors and affirms their contribution.

Now, in light of Nehemiah's having taken the time and energy to include the names of these heroes, here is an application project for each one of us today.

### **Application project:**

First, think back over your Christian experience. Remember those who have made a difference in your life for God.

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<sup>1</sup> Scholarly debate rages concerning some *apparent* discrepancies in the lists of the names of priests and Levites at various places in Nehemiah. The apparently conflicting lists are reconcilable, although to do reconcile them one must come from the perspective of believing that they are reconcilable, rather than from the perspective of trying to find a problem. I won't get into the technicalities of the debate here, but can direct you, if you wish, to Gleason Archer's book, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (pp. 410-416), or to Cyril Barbers' commentary, *Nehemiah: and the Dynamics of Effective Leadership*, op. cit. for helpful comments.

Take a moment, right now, to thank God for them and for the contribution to your life that that man, that woman, made to your walk with God. Pray God's rich blessings in their lives.

Now, think of those who are currently investing in you. Some time later today or this week, jot a note to them. Make a point to call them, or take them out to lunch to say, "Thanks."

And then think of those who are serving Jesus in this place. Look around you. There are heroes and heroines sitting to your right and left, in front and behind you. They teach your children and lead you in worship and pray for you and serve Jesus in all kinds of wonderful, God-honoring ways. Thank them. Affirm them.

There are many times when we should be telling people who have pressed Jesus into our lives how much their investment has meant to us. Nehemiah reminds us of how important the ministry of affirmation is.

And, he also would remind us, at all times, we need to be giving thanks to God for His many mercies.

And that thought brings us to the section of our passage toward which we've been aiming, not just for the past several minutes, but for the past several weeks. Nehemiah has written in praise of the wonderful servants of God. In the final section, he writes of how we and all Jerusalem actually worshipped this wonderful God!

When we come to Nehemiah 12:27 we land in a worship service to remember.<sup>2</sup> This was not a regular Sabbath worship service. It was a special service of dedication for the completion of the wall.

Not that every experience of worship is not special - it is! - but this one was EXTRA-special. This was one of those momentous times when you pull out all the stops and throw one whale of a party in celebration of the goodness of God and the greatness of His works!

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<sup>2</sup> We are not given dates for this worship service. It may have taken place immediately after the completion of the wall re-building project. Or, (more likely) it might have occurred some months after the wall was finished.

And this was not to be a somber, solemn occasion. This was a fiesta, a NIOSA (without the excesses) for God!

Certain key players were needed to make this gala event all that it needed to be.

### **In Praise of God! (12:27-43)**

#### **The PLAYERS in This “Worship Service to Remember” (vv. 27-30)**

*Levites come to Jerusalem for the dedication of the wall (v. 27)*

***[27] Now at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought out the Levites from all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem so that they might celebrate the dedication with gladness, with hymns of thanksgiving and with songs to the accompaniment of cymbals, harps, and lyres.***

To have the right atmosphere, they needed the Levites in Jerusalem. Why? The Levites knew all the right tunes. They were the musicians in Israel.

And, scattered throughout the Judean hill country were the best harp players, zither players, and percussionist in the land. They were all called to the city for this grand event.

Another group, the singers, was invited to Jerusalem for this special celebration.

*Singers come to Jerusalem for the dedication of the wall (vv. 28-29)*

***[28] So the sons of the singers were assembled from the district around Jerusalem, and from the villages of the Netophathites, [29] from Beth-gilgal, and from their fields in Geba and Azmaveth, for the singers had built themselves villages around Jerusalem.***

The singers had settled down in the suburbs surrounding Jerusalem. They were called to the big city for the great day of dedication. Music, led by trained singers and trained musicians, would provide for a rocking good time on the day of dedication.

But more than music was needed on this special day. The people came. And they came prepared to worship!

*The priests and Levites engaged in rites of purification (v. 30)*

***[30] And the priests and the Levites purified themselves; they also purified the people, the gates, and the wall.***

Now, certainly they were eager for worship. Their hearts were primed. But they also would have bathed, a symbolic act of cleansing. They might have spent time with God in prayer before coming to the worship service. They prepared themselves, body and spirit to praise the Lord.

And with all the players in their places and everybody ready to give thanks to the Lord, the dedication service begins.

There is a lot of movement in this worship service! We trace the movements of two specially designated marching choirs.

#### **Choreography in This “Worship Service to Remember” (vv. 31-39)**

*The leaders of Judah joined Nehemiah on top of the wall (v. 31a)*

***[31a] Then I had the leaders of Judah come up on top of the wall, and I appointed two great choirs***

Here, Nehemiah wears a hat we haven't seen grace his head yet. We know that he is a man of prayer, a superb administrator, and a courageous statesman. Now we discover that he was a skilled worship choreographer!

He positioned the singers and the musicians at set locations for the dedication of the wall.

First, we watch the movement of the first choir.

*The activities of the first choir (vv. 31b-37)*

***[31b] the first proceeding to the right on top of the wall toward the Refuse Gate. [32] Hoshaiiah and half of the leaders of Judah followed them, [33] with Azariah, Ezra, Meshullam,***

**[34] Judah, Benjamin, Shemaiah, Jeremiah, [35] and some of the sons of the priests with trumpets; and Zechariah the son of Jonathan, the son of Shemaiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son of Micaiah, the son of Zaccur, the son of Asaph, [36] and his kinsmen, Shemaiah, Azarel, Milalai, Gilalai, Maai, Nethanel, Judah and Hanani, with the musical instruments of David the man of God. And Ezra the scribe went before them. [37] And at the Fountain Gate they went directly up the steps of the city of David by the stairway of the wall above the house of David to the Water Gate on the east.**

Ezra the scribe was in this first choir. We've seen Ezra before, and he is a major Old Testament hero. Many believe that he wrote 1 and 2 Chronicles as well as the book that bears his name.

He was a serious Bible student, a gifted Bible teacher, and a courageous man of God. Here, he is marching around the city with the choir, singing his lungs out.

Beginning at a certain, designated place (perhaps near the Valley Gate, on the western side of the city), they marched south to the Refuse Gate and then north past the Fountain Gate. When they came to the Water Gate (on the east side of the city), this choir halted.

Then, we trace the route of the second choir.

*The activities of the second choir (vv. 38-39)*

**[38] The second choir proceeded to the left, while I followed them with half of the people on the wall, above the Tower of Furnaces, to the Broad Wall, [39] and above the Gate of Ephraim, by the Old Gate, by the Fish Gate, the Tower of Hananel, and the Tower of the Hundred, as far as the Sheep Gate, and they stopped at the Gate of the Guard.**

Nehemiah himself marched with the second choir. Beginning at the same place as the first choir, they moved to the left (i.e. north), marching around the city on top of the wall.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Remember Tobiah's taunting from chapter four, "If a fox should jump on the wall, it would fall down!"? Well, the Jews have chosen a great place to showcase the strength of the wall by holding the dedication to the wall on the top of it!

They passed the gates on the western and northern walls (Old Gate, Fish Gate, Sheep Gate), and stopped at the Gate of the Guard, or what was known as the "Muster Gate."

While we are not told that they did this, I have always imagined the two choirs singing antiphonally, back and forth to each other. The musicians, lugging their instruments around, were playing, too, while walking on top of the wall.

The two choirs made their way to stopping points. Choir #1 at the Gate of the Guard; Choir #2 at the Water Gate.

Imagine the scene. For a moment, the singing stops. The city was silent. And then - both choirs marched, with the second choir marching south and west and the first choir marching due north, singing at the top of their lungs to their final destination, the high point of the city and the heart of the nation's life with God: the Temple!

#### **O Come, Let Us Adore Him! (vv. 40-43)**

**[40] Then the two choirs took their stand in the house of God. So did I and half of the officials with me; [41] and the priests, Eliakim, Maaseiah, Miniamin, Micaiah, Elioenai, Zechariah, and Hananiah, with the trumpets; [42] and Maaseiah, Shemaiah, Eleazar, Uzzi, Jehohanan, Malchijah, Elam, and Ezer. And the singers sang, with Jezrahiah their leader, [43] and on that day they offered great sacrifices and rejoiced because God had given them great joy, even the women and children rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard from afar.<sup>4</sup>**

There, in the Temple's outer court, with the government officials, priests, and Levites present, with Ezra and Nehemiah both present, and with all the people there, they worshipped the Lord with all their hearts for all that He had done for them.

And they let it all hang out in worship! They sang so loud that the Arabs and the Horonites and the Canaanites and the Ammonites could hear. They offered so many sacrifices that the smoke was seen rising for miles.

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<sup>4</sup> For comparison, the ceremonies for the dedication of Solomon's Temple lasted seven full days.

The work - done together - was done. It was done to the glory of God, and with the help of God. Jerusalem was safe! The wall is in place. The gates are up. The hearts of the people have been revived.

So, the singers sang and great sacrifices were offered and the overwhelming emotion of that day was JOY!

And at the end of the day, after enjoying such a tremendous experience in worship, they determined they were going to make corporate worship a priority - from that day forward!

### **Making Worship an On-Going Priority (12:44-47)**

*[44a] On that day men were also appointed over the chambers for the stores, the contributions, the first fruits, and the tithes, to gather into them from the fields of the cities the portions required by the law for the priests and Levites. On that day men were also appointed over the chambers for the stores, the contributions, the first fruits, and the tithes, to gather into them from the fields of the cities the portions required by the law for the priests and Levites; for Judah rejoiced over the priests and Levites who served. [45] For they performed the worship of their God and the service of purification, together with the singers and the gatekeepers in accordance with the command of David and of his son Solomon. [46] For in the days of David and Asaph, in ancient times, there were leaders of the singers, songs of praise and hymns of thanksgiving to God. [47] And so all Israel in the days of Zerubbabel and Nehemiah gave the portions due the singers and the gatekeepers as each day required, and set apart the consecrated portion for the Levites, and the Levites set apart the consecrated portion for the sons of Aaron.*

On the day of the dedication service, the leaders of the city put responsible men in charge of the support of the worship leaders - after all, that is what the tithe of the grains and flocks was for!

It is as if the people thought to themselves, *“This worship stuff is too good a thing to have happen only once in a blue moon. Let’s make sure that things are in place to ensure that we can have a service like this as often as we want!”*

So, this commitment to oversee the tithes and offerings was a commitment to the priesthood. And with that, the infrastructure was in place. The revival has come full circle. Everything is in order in the city for it to become all it ever was in the good old days when David and Solomon were in charge.<sup>5</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

Scripture promises that JOY is to be found in the presence and in the service of God. So we’re not surprised to find that Nehemiah 12 is the happiest chapter in the book!

All of the preparation work, the *manuring* - the wall-rebuilding and the re-Bibling and the confession and the promises - has had its proper end. The people of God are worshipping and are set to keep on serving the Lord!

It just doesn’t get any better than this.

And we are reminded, right now, that we serve the same God they served - except that we now know so much more about Him than Nehemiah or the priests and the Levites or even Ezra knew.

As learned as they were, they didn’t know anything about Jesus. Nothing about His perfect life and sacrificial death and glorious resurrection. As much as they had to praise the Lord about, we have so much more. You and I worship a risen Savior every single Sunday!

And it is our privilege to praise and honor our God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - this God who is awesome and holy and loving and gracious; this God who has redeemed us, made us a part of His forever family, forgiven us all our sins, and given us a certain future in Heaven with Him throughout eternity.

We have so much for which to praise Him. What a great God we serve! He has truly done great things!!

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<sup>5</sup> In David’s day, praise, hymns, and thanksgivings were normal parts of the national life. It was the accepted norm that worship was important and a vital priority. And the people esteemed their spiritual leaders. Now all of that is being repeated here in the days of Nehemiah.