

Sermon – All Hands on Deck Sunday May 19, 2024

What's your passion?

- Maybe it's sports or a hobby.
- Maybe it's the latest gadgets.
- Maybe it's travelling and exploring new places.

The world tells you to follow your passion and do what makes you happy. But what if your passion no longer makes you happy? What if it's your school or your job? What if it's your relationships or your marriage? Are you supposed to leave and pursue a new passion?

Passion isn't a bad thing. God has given us passions to inspire us and bring us joy. But here's the problem. Because of our sinful nature, your tendency and mine is to make passion all about ME. What's in it for me? What can the world do for me?

Instead of asking, What's my passion, a better question might be, What's my purpose?

Because if passion is about getting your needs met, then purpose is about giving your life away.

- It's about serving others.
- It's about making a difference.
- It's about living for something bigger than yourself.

In fact, your purpose should be so big that you can't do it by yourself. You need to do it with others.

So what's your purpose? What were you created for? Is there something we are meant to pursue together?

We're in a series called *Re-Visioning: Pursuing God's Purpose Through Fresh Eyes*. As Cornerstone enters a new season of discerning God's long-term vision, we're studying the book of Nehemiah. We're learning from Nehemiah how to pray, how to discern God's vision and how to lead God's people.

But before we get into today's message, here's a little background.

The events take place in the year 444BC. Nehemiah is living in the Persian city of Susa under the Persian empire. But how did this come to be?

Well, 145 years earlier, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon invaded Judah. He began a siege against King Zedekiah that lasted over a year. Eventually the Jews ran out of food and King Nebuchadnezzar breaks through the walls, pillages the city and kills many of the Jews.

The walls, the temple and the whole city are razed to the ground. The holy city of Jerusalem is in ruins. The surviving Jews are taken back to Babylon where they live as exiles.

But 50 years later, a new kingdom comes into power. The Persian kingdom conquers Babylon. And Cyrus, the Persian king decides to allow the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the city.

Now the book of Nehemiah takes place 60 years after the first wave of exiles have returned. Nehemiah is the personal cupbearer to Artaxerxes the King of Persia.

In chapter 1, Nehemiah finds out from his brother that the Jerusalem walls are in ruins. So he weeps and fasts. Then for months he prays and he prays and he prays. In fact, a major theme of this book is that when you do anything for God, you need to cover it in prayer.

Because it's through prayer that Nehemiah discerns God's vision: To rebuild the walls and restore the nation of Israel. But how will he do that? He has no resources or authority.

We find out in chapter 2, that God presents an opportunity. One day, King Artaxerxes notices that Nehemiah looks sad. So he asks him what's wrong. And at great risk to himself, Nehemiah actually tells him how the walls are in ruins.

And do you know what the king says? He says, So how can I help?

Remember, Nehemiah has been praying but he's also been planning. So when the king asks, Nehemiah is ready.

He says, Please give me permission to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls. And if you don't mind, could you also give us protection on our trip and provide the resources to rebuild?

That's a pretty bold request! How would the king respond? The text says:

And because the gracious hand of my God was on me, the king granted my requests. (Nehemiah 2:8)

Is there a challenge you're facing right now that feels too big to overcome? Do you feel like giving up? Are you trying to face it on your own? Like Nehemiah you can pray - because God answers prayers. Nehemiah prayed for months over this situation.

And when the time came, God blesses him, provides for him and gives him favour. But there's still a challenge. How will Nehemiah rebuild the wall?

Please turn with me in your Bibles to Nehemiah 3:1-5.

Eliashib the high priest and his fellow priests went to work and rebuilt the Sheep Gate. They dedicated it and set its doors in place, building as far as the Tower of the Hundred, which they dedicated, and as far as the Tower of Hananel. ² The men of Jericho built the adjoining section, and Zakkur son of Imri built next to them.

³ The Fish Gate was rebuilt by the sons of Hassenaah. They laid its beams and put its doors and bolts and bars in place. ⁴ Meremoth son of Uriah, the son of Hakkoz, repaired the next section. Next to him Meshullam son of Berekiah, the son of Meshezabel, made repairs, and next to him Zadok son of Baana also made repairs. ⁵ The next section was repaired by the men of Tekoa, but their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors.^[a]

Chapters 1 and 2 in the book of Nehemiah gave us drama and excitement. What do we get in Chapter 3? We get a boring list; a list that goes on like this for 32 verses. A list of 38 names you

can't pronounce, 42 districts you know nothing about and 40 sections of the wall that are being rebuilt.

The rebuilding starts at the Sheep Gate at the north section of the wall. Then it moves counter clockwise, next to the Fish Gate, then the Old Gate, eventually around to the Inspection Gate and finally back up to the Sheep Gate.

Now if you're wondering, Why is this list here? Couldn't we get something more exciting? You're not alone. Many Bible scholars have thought the same thing. They call this list "intrusive" and "monotonous". It doesn't fit and it disrupts the dramatic narrative.

Not only that, but Nehemiah isn't even mentioned in this list? Isn't he the hero of the story?

I think Nehemiah's omission actually makes an important point. That no one - no matter how important, faithful or capable can accomplish God's work on their own. Why? Because **Advancing God's mission takes all of God's people to actively engage and play their part.**

When God gave Pastor Andrew a vision to plant an intentionally intercultural church in Markham, Cornerstone didn't just happen because of him. It happened because all of God's people actively engaged and played their part.

When God gave Cornerstone leaders a vision to build a community centre-style facility, Cornerstone Centre didn't just happen because of them. It happened because all of God's people actively engaged and played their part.

We're making space right now to see what new vision God has in store for us. This special **Prayer & Re-Envisioning Event** will take place this Saturday May 25th. There's a purple handout on your seat with a QR code you can scan to sign-up.

And when God gives us a new vision that will help us develop new leaders and reach new people for Jesus, it's not going to happen because of what the pastors and staff do. It's going to happen – why? Because all of God's people... all of you will be actively engaged and playing your part.

Turn to your neighbour and tell them, We need you on the wall!

So who does Nehemiah enlist to rebuild the wall? You and I would probably choose skilled labourers or experienced workers right? But when you look at this list, you'll notice that the people have no experience or skill in building walls. Take a look – you have:

priests (vv. 1, 28)

goldsmiths (vv. 8, 31, 32)

perfume makers (v. 8)

merchants (v. 32)

district rulers (vv. 9, 12, 14-19)

temple servants (v. 26)

How does a diverse group of people with no skill in building walls accomplish the task in only 52 days? What can we learn as we pursue the vision God gives us? I'd like to share three characteristics.

The first characteristic is, **God's people are united in purpose.**

There's a refrain that's repeated throughout Nehemiah 3. It's the phrase, **next to him...** We see this for example in verse 17.

Next to him, the repairs were made by the Levites under Rehum son of Bani. [Next to him], Hashabiah, ruler of half the district of Keilah, carried out repairs for his district. ¹⁸ Next to him, the repairs were made by their fellow Levites... ¹⁹ Next to him Ezer son of Jeshua...repaired another section... (vv. 17-19)

This phrase *next to him* is used 21 times in this chapter. I imagine God's people working shoulder to shoulder on the wall. And for them, the wall isn't just about their physical safety or honour. Rebuilding the wall is a sign that God is restoring the nation.

- God's people would worship again in the temple.
- God's people would gather again in community.
- God's people would go into the world to fulfill their mission.

This purpose was what united the people. So if you asked the people on the north wall, What are you doing? They would say, We're rebuilding the wall so that God can restore the nation. Then if you walk over to the west wall and ask the people there, What are you doing? They would say, We're rebuilding the wall so that God can restore the nation. And then if you walk over to the south and east walls and ask the people there, they would say the same thing.

Where did the people get the idea that they have a mission from God?

They got it from God. In Genesis 12, God tells Abraham to leave his home and go to the land God will show him. Then he gives this promise.

**"I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.^[a]
³ I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you." (Genesis 12:2-3)**

Do you know what this means? God's people are a *so that* people.

We're blessed not so we can enjoy the blessings for ourselves. We're blessed not so we can live a comfortable life. We're blessed *so that* we can be a blessing.

- So that our lives would display God's love and goodness.
- So that our service would heal the hurting and bring them hope.
- So that our unity would show the world that there is a God who loves them and he's working in the world for their good.

We are a *so that* people. God has given us a mission. At Cornerstone we say that our mission is to Make Space for Jesus to shape people together in God's love.

Cornerstone is a diverse congregation. We have people from different cultures, different backgrounds, different church traditions. We have people of different ages, different life stages and different socio-economic situations. With such a diverse group, what is it that brings us together?

Jesus. And his mission to Make Space for Jesus to shape people together in God's love.

That's why when you ask people on the worship team, Why do you serve? They'll tell you, We're making space for Jesus. That's why when you ask people in Children's Ministry, Why do you serve? They'll tell you, We're making space for Jesus. That's why when you ask people in our Shawarma Ministry, Why do you serve? Well, we don't have a Shawarma Ministry... yet, but if we did they would tell you, We're making space for Jesus.

Making Space for Jesus is what we do. It's the mission that unites us because God's people are united in purpose.

The second characteristic is, **God's people serve willingly and help out where needed.**

In verse 5, there's an awkward situation.

The next section was repaired by the men of Tekoa, but their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors. (v. 5)

Apparently the nobles of Tekoa weren't willing to serve. We don't know why. Maybe they're not used to hard work. Maybe they just don't care. Maybe they just want to enjoy the benefits without doing any work.

We just don't know why. But what we do know is how the other men respond. Not only do they repair this section of the wall without the help of the nobles. But they go above and beyond - they repair another section of the wall too. Verse 27, it says:

...the men of Tekoa repaired another section, from the great projecting tower to the wall of Ophel. (v. 27)

The truth is, not everyone will help out with the work. But when there's a gap that needs to be filled, God's people don't complain, they don't criticize, they don't sit around. What do we do? We serve willingly and do what's needed.

We see another example in verse 14.

The Dung Gate was repaired by Malkijah son of Rekab... (v. 14)

Why do you think the Dung Gate is called the Dung Gate? It's called the Dung Gate because it's located at the south of the city where the wall opens up to the Kidron Valley. This is where people brought their garbage to burn.

Now how many of you would want to work all day next to the stench of burning garbage? Wouldn't you want to work instead at the Freshly Baked Cookies Gate or the Sizzling Bacon In A Pan Gate?

But you know who's willing to work at the Dung Gate? Malkijah son of Rekab. Who's Malkijah? Probably a sanitation worker or a farmer who's used to smelly things right?

Wrong. Verse 14 tells us that Malkijah is a district ruler. He's a white collar guy with authority. But unlike the nobles of Tekoa, he isn't turned off by grunt work or the stench of garbage.

The Dung Gate was repaired by Malkijah son of Rekab, ruler of the district of Beth Hakkerem. He rebuilt it and put its doors with their bolts and bars in place. (v. 14)

Why? Because he's focused on the mission. Mission moves God's people to action. When God's people see problems, hurts and needs – they do something about it. They serve willingly and do what's needed.

Now, by God's grace, Cornerstone has grown a lot over the past few years. This growth means more people are needed to serve and lead across all our ministries. So many of you have stepped up and said, Count me in! I want to be a part of what God is doing and make a difference in our community.

Can we just acknowledge everyone here who's been faithfully serving? Let's give them a hand. Thank you for your dedication and service.

Now, while many of our ministries have the volunteers they need, two ministries currently have an urgent need to fill some key roles.

- Our Worship Ministry is looking for more band members. They're also looking for people behind the scenes to help in various Audio Visual roles.
- Our Children's Ministry is looking for Preschool/JK teachers, people to lead children's worship and hall monitors.

So if you feel like God is nudging you and you have some musical or technical proficiencies or a heart for children, please contact Kristy or Annie and they'd love to connect with you.

[Note for Visual Worship:

Kristy, Worship Ministry – kristy@cornerstonechurch.ca

Annie, Children's Ministry – annie@cornerstonechurch.ca]

God's people serve willingly and help out where needed.

The third characteristic is, **God's people build right where they live.**

When you look at the people who built the wall, where do they come from? Most of them come from Jerusalem, some of them come from nearby towns, and some of them built the wall right where they lived. For example:

Jedaiah... made repairs opposite his house, (v. 10)

Benjamin and Hasshub made repairs in front of their house (v. 23)

the priests made repairs, each in front of his own house. (v.28)

Zadok... made repairs opposite his house. (v. 29)

Meshullam... made repairs opposite his living quarters. (v. 30)

When we talk about serving, we think about serving in the church. People come to church to serve. And these roles are important and help move the mission forward.

But here's the thing: is the mission of the church just about what happens inside these walls? Is the church just a building? No. Because what is the church?

The church is the people of God on mission for God in the world. We're called to be a light. We're called to bring hope and healing. We're sent out to share the good news. That's why we need people to build the wall right where they are – in their schools, homes, workplaces and community.

How do you build where you are? You build:

- When you study and work with integrity.
- When you stand up for justice.
- When you practice kindness and compassion.
- When you're a peacemaker.
- When you're generous.
- When you share the gospel with your words and actions.

When you do these things, you're standing with God's people on the wall. You're helping to advance God's mission. God's mission needs people with different backgrounds and different strengths serving in different places.

Because Advancing God's mission takes all of God's people to actively engage and play their part.

But make no mistake - when we pursue God's mission, there will be challenges. There will be external challenges – tough problems to solve, hard decisions to make, big obstacles to overcome. There will also be internal challenges – different opinions, misunderstandings, hard feelings.

So how do God's people overcome these inevitable challenges and remain faithful in pursuing God's mission?

- We remain united in purpose.
- We serve willingly and help out where needed.
- We build right where we are.

Imagine for a moment, the tools in Jesus' workshop having a discussion. They're arguing because they think some of the other tools aren't doing their fair share of work. So they have a meeting.

The Hammer presides and says, I'd like to call this meeting to order! Then someone shouts out, the Hammer has to go because he's so noisy and lacks any sensitivity and tact. Then the Hammer says, I think the Screwdriver has to go because you have to twist him to do anything. Then the Screwdriver says, I think the Ruler has to go because she's always measuring others against herself. Then the Ruler says, I think the Sandpaper has to go because he's always rubbing people the wrong way. Then the Ruler says, I think the Plane has to go because she's so superficial and lacks any depth.

Just at that moment, Jesus walks in to work on a project. He lovingly picks up each tool and masterfully uses each one. When he's done, he looks at his work and says, It's beautiful!

The tools see his work as well and recognize Jesus has used them to build something incredible. They begin to regret their petty jealousy and bickering because they realize that all the tools were needed. And each one played an important part in building something beautiful for Jesus.

Advancing God's mission takes all of God's people to actively engage and play their part.

Let's pray.