

# We Volunteer: the Language of Ministry

## Nehemiah 11

This week I ran across a list of things you rarely ever hear said In Church:

Hey! It's MY turn to sit on the front pew!

I was so enthralled, I never noticed your sermon went over time 25 minutes.

Personally, I find witnessing much more enjoyable than golf.

I love it when we sing hymns I've never heard before!

Since we're all here, let's start the worship service early!

Pastor, we'd like to send you to this Bible seminar in the Bahamas.

I volunteer to be the permanent teacher for the Junior High Sunday School class.

Don't you just love people who will volunteer to serve willingly?

On a blood-bank poster which read: "Be a volunteer Blood Donor," somebody had printed, "That's the best kind."

And in Nehemiah 11 we are going to see some of the best kind of people, folks who were willing to volunteer in spite of what it would cost them and their families.

Before we can understand the 11th chapter of Nehemiah we need to get a little background. And the background is found in the 7th chapter, so let's back up for just a moment and read a few verses there.

Nehemiah 7:1-2 says, "**Then it was, when the wall was built and I had hung the doors, when the gatekeepers, the singers, and the Levites had been appointed, that I gave the charge of Jerusalem to my brother Hanani, and Hananiah the leader of the citadel, for he was a faithful man and feared God more than many.**"

Here is the picture: The wall project has been finished. The temple had already been completed - but the city was missing one important ingredient - people!

Nehemiah 7:4 tells us, "**Now the city was large and spacious, but the people in it were few, and the houses were not rebuilt.**"

ILL. Do you remember the little finger exercise we learned when we were children in S.S.? "This is the church / this is the steeple / Open the doors / & see all the people."

Nehemiah's version would go like this. "This is the gate / & This is the city / Open the gate / & my, what a pity / No people!" Everything else necessary was there - the wall was there - the temple was there - but no people! What is a city without people?

Why were there no people in Jerusalem? The reason is two fold, I suppose.

1. First of all, **building a house in Jerusalem was hard work**. The city had been completely destroyed 160 years before. What had once been a great city had been laid waste. The walls & every building had been demolished, torn down. Boulders & ruins of buildings were everywhere!

So before anyone could build a house in the city they would have to deal with all the rubble. And that was going to take a lot of time and effort before they could even start on the task of building their home! So most of the people had decided that it simply wasn't worth the trouble to rebuild amidst the ruins of Jerusalem.

2. Secondly, **they didn't feel safe in Jerusalem**. For 160 years the walls had been down and the city open to marauders.

So during these years the people had built new homes and towns outside of Jerusalem. It was much easier to build and fortify their new homes in than it was to clean up and rebuild Jerusalem.

So they are comfortable. They have planted their roots in the soil, and they are just as content as they could possibly be. And it has been this way with them for years. Then Nehemiah came, and now there is a wall around Jerusalem once again.

So back to Nehemiah 11, the city is secure with its new wall, but nobody is living in it. Well, almost nobody. Nehemiah 11:1 says, "**Now the leaders of the people dwelt at Jerusalem; the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of ten to dwell in Jerusalem, the holy city, and nine-tenths were to dwell in other cities.**"

Here we come across a situation where the people are faced with a national referendum. But instead of taking a vote, they cast lots to determine what should be done. In the Old Testament, the casting of lots was like throwing dice and was a way of discovering God's will. We even see this used in the Book of Acts when the disciples are trying to figure out who should replace Judas in Acts 1:26: "**And they cast their lots, and the lot fell on Matthias. And he was numbered with the eleven apostles.**"

They didn't cast lots because they believed in "luck" or "chance." They actually were so committed to the sovereignty of God that they knew God would direct the outcome of the lots according to His divine providence. Proverbs 16:33 says, "**The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.**" The votes are cast by the people but the election is determined by the Lord.

Since the walls and gates of Jerusalem were now restored, it was important that the builders inhabit their capital city and make the population grow. In chapter 10 the people had promised to tithe their produce and income; now Nehemiah asks them to tithe the people by arranging for 10% of them to move to the city.

I'm not sure exactly what procedure they used to get the 10%. Verse 1 says they cast lots, but verse 2 says they volunteered. It could be that those in verse 1 had to be drafted, while those in verse 2 simply volunteered. Maybe they cast the lot and if it fell to you they asked if you would volunteer to move. Maybe they had so many volunteer that they cast the lot so that only one in ten moved.

Whichever it was, verse 2 says, **“And the people blessed all the men who willingly offered themselves to dwell at Jerusalem.”** The NIV puts it, **“The people commended all the men who volunteered to live in Jerusalem.”**

They volunteered. Nobody told them that they had to do it, but because they loved Jerusalem - because they loved God - they were willing to sacrifice their homes and all their comforts & move into the city. They were willing to clean away the rubble - callous their hands - build a house - and rebuild once again the holy city of God.

These believers exhibited four counter-cultural traits that have application to us today.

#### **4 Traits to Emulate**

**1. Move out of your comfort zone.** Most of the families living outside Jerusalem depended entirely on the land for their daily existence. Over the years they had developed a pattern of life as they plowed, planted and harvested their crops. For many of them, the thought of leaving their comfort zone was highly traumatic. But some left their homes, relatives, neighbors, work, friends, and familiar routines to set up a new life in a radically different environment.

Jesus' first disciples did the same. The fishermen left their boats and nets. The tax collector left his booth. They all left their homes and parents. In Mark 10 after seeing Jesus interact with the rich young ruler, Peter asks, **“See, we have left all and followed You.”** (Mark 10:28). Jesus says to him, **“Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel's, who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time; houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life.”** (Matt. 19:29).

Are you willing to leave your comfort zone for the sake of the kingdom? I don't know what God might be asking you to do, but I do know that He wants you to be available. I'll never forget what God did when we left the Air Force to go to seminary in Kansas City.

What is God asking you to do what may stretch you? As you pray for your neighbors, maybe God wants to use you to share the gospel with them. For many of us, that's outside our comfort zone. Maybe God is calling you to teach a Sunday School class, or help in our VBS. Or it might be a commitment to start tithing. God might ask you to go on a short-term mission trip. Whatever it is, tell God you're willing to live outside your normal boundaries. Let him stretch you.

**2. Commit to holiness.** After moving out of their comfort zone, the believers commit to holy living. They didn't just agree to live in a remodeled city; they were coming to **“the holy city”** (11:1). Literally it reads, **“Jerusalem, the city of holiness.”** Nehemiah stresses holiness. Jerusalem was to be holy, set apart for the Lord's special use. To live in Jerusalem and be given the opportunity to serve God in such a holy place was an immense privilege.

To live in the holy city might be a great privilege, but it was also a challenging responsibility. It's one thing to have a home in a holy city; it's another thing to

make a home holy. Living in a holy city did not automatically transmit holiness to the individual citizens. We are going to see in chapter 13 that they have to make some tough choices to separate themselves from the pagan world. They had to give everything over to God.

In the NT Hebrews 12:14 says, **“Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord.”** And 1 Thess. 4:7 (KJV), **“For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness.”** And Peter says it plainly, **“but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, “Be holy, for I am holy.”** (1 Peter 1:15-16)

Have you committed yourself to holiness and purity? Are you living your life separated from the “world” because you’re set apart for His use?

**3. Mobilize for ministry.** Now that the people were committed to live outside their comfort zone and wholeheartedly devoted to holy living, they are now ready to be mobilized for ministry.

In the remainder of chapter 11, we see that God has always used a wide variety of people. I see three different groups in this passage:

Those with leadership gifts. In addition to the leaders mentioned in verse 1, there were **“the heads of the province”** mentioned in verse 3. These pacesetters were noble examples to those who were relocating to Jerusalem. If the leaders are out front, then others will follow. Someone has said, ‘The speed of the leader determines the speed of the team.’ This is true. As the leaders of our church commit their time, talents and treasures to kingdom living and kingdom expansion, the environment is set for others to follow that example.

Those with administrative gifts. As you read this long list of names in chapter 11, there were other people who served as administrators. Verse 9: **“Joel the son of Zichri was their overseer, and Judah the son of Senuah was second over the city.”** These officers made sure the city functioned well and that the infrastructure was sufficient to handle the growing population.

Those with serving gifts. Verse 16 tells us that two guys **“Shabbethai and Jozabad, of the heads of the Levites, had the oversight of the business outside of the house of God.”** The temple had to be kept in good repair and these individuals dedicated their practical skills to care for the building. We have been blessed people at New Covenant Baptist who serve with both their hearts and their hands. Thanks for your commitment to this part of the ministry. Actually, this church is filled with people who use their serving gifts on a regular basis. You are appreciated!

Friend, are you mobilized for ministry? As Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 make clear, every believer has at least one spiritual gift given by God to use in ministry. We are saved to serve. As I like to say: “No one can do everything, but everyone can do something.” Let me encourage you to find a place of ministry in this church in the community. Discover the joy of serving in your area of giftedness.

**4. Adore God in worship.** Take a look at 11:17 where we see, **“Mattaniah the son of Micha, the son of Zabdi, the son of Asaph, the leader who began the**

**thanksgiving with prayer;.”** In thanksgiving we acknowledge God’s generosity. In prayer we seek God’s help. These themes were often expressed in song as we see in verse 22: **“Also the overseer of the Levites at Jerusalem was Uzzi the son of Bani, the son of Hashabiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son of Micha, of the sons of Asaph, the singers in charge of the service of the house of God.”**

David had commissioned his worship leader Asaph in a similar way centuries earlier in 1 Chronicles 16:8: **“Oh, give thanks to the LORD! Call upon His name; Make known His deeds among the peoples!”** Praise and prayer are central to the spiritual life of God’s people.

What great lessons we learn from the example of these people in Jerusalem. They volunteered to make the sacrifice of living in Jerusalem. Nobody had to guilt them into it. They all raised their hands and said, “I’ll go.” And because of that, everybody celebrated. They celebrated and blessed those who got to go. God calls everyday people. His call is rarely spectacular. It always involves sacrifice. And it works best and is cause for celebration when everybody is willing. That’s how God works His plan. He works it by calling everyday people like you and me.

God is calling you today. And His call to you may involve one of these decisions:

- Is Jesus resident in your life? Have you ever surrendered your life to Jesus by turning from your sins and asking Him to save you? If not, that’s what you need to do this morning.
- Is Jesus president of your life? Are you living under His lordship and leadership? Is He on the throne, or are you? Are you serving in ministry at His direction and through the power of His Spirit? Are you committed to holiness?

You see, Jesus is Savior and Lord. He is forgiver and leader. He not only wants to be resident, He desires to be your president.

Responding to God means you come to the point where He can have anything you’ve got; it comes to the point where you release everything to God – past, present, future – all of it. It requires sacrifice to serve God.

A Sunday School first grade class teacher asked her young charges, “If I sold my house and my car, had a big garage sale and gave all my money to the church, would I get into Heaven?” “NO!” the children all answered.

“If I cleaned the church every day, mowed the yard, and kept everything neat and tidy, would I get into Heaven”? Again, the answer was “NO”!

“Well,” I continued, “then how can I get to Heaven?” In the back of the room, a 5 yr. old boy shouted out, “You gotta be dead!”

That’s how it is with God – He doesn’t use you unless you are willing to be dead – to sin and self, that is! Dying to self means coming to the point of giving it all up to God, starting with who you are, and your future.