

Opposition and Perseverance

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[0 : 0 0] So, good morning to you all, especially if you're new, you're here for the first time. We're delighted that you're here. My name's Tommy. I'm the rector here. So, on behalf of our church, welcome.

This is a Sunday where we are focusing, and you'll see a little bit more of this later in the service, we're focusing on the various ministries of our church, all of the various ministries that many of you serve in and some of you lead in.

And so, we're going to hear some testimonies a little bit later from people and the way they've been impacted by your ministry in this community. And so, it would make sense to preach a sermon that is inspirational, right, that talks about the ministries in a way that inspires people.

But here's the thing I really want to say. Ministry is hard. Ministry is hard. Some people, especially people who have not really ever done ministry in the name of God, or people who have not been a part of a church, might be prone to think that, well, you know, they'll say something along the lines of, well, if you're doing ministry in the name of God, shouldn't that mean that God's going to bless you?

And wouldn't that mean that your life's actually going to be easier? Because God is blessing you because of all the things that you're doing for Him. But the truth is, when you're committed to doing work for God to glorify Him, when you're committed to living out the gospel in your relationships, in your job, your career, in your neighborhood, when you're working to reach people with the gospel and encourage them to grow in their faith, when you're serving and caring for those in need and dealing with all the incredible complexity there, when you're doing the work of reconciliation and peacemaking, when you're working to build a church in the heart of a city like Washington, D.C., it can sometimes feel like an uphill battle.

[1 : 5 4] It can sometimes feel like you're taking one step forward and five steps back. You can sometimes feel like Sisyphus rolling the boulder up the hill only to watch it roll back down again. You inspired?

You excited about what's coming? In our study of Nehemiah, we come here to chapter four. And what we're actually going to see in chapter four of Nehemiah is that there's a reason why ministry in God's name is so hard.

God calls Nehemiah and blesses him to go and lead in the rebuilding of Jerusalem. So Nehemiah leads this palace that he's been living in in Susa. He travels to Jerusalem.

He surveys the walls. He gathers the people together. But in chapter four, as soon as they start to build, they encounter fierce resistance.

And it does not let up. So here's what we're going to look at this morning. Why is ministry so hard? And then what can we do about it? How do we persevere? Let's pray.

[2 : 5 7] Lord, we thank you for your word. And we thank you that because it's timeless, it is always timely. Lord, that this story that is 2,400 years old can speak into our lives right now.

And it's only able to do that because of you. Because it's not just written words, ink on paper. It's a living word through the power of your spirit. You can speak to us, Lord. You can comfort those who need to be comforted.

You can challenge those who need to be challenged. Convict those of us who need to be convicted, Lord. You can bring life where there is death. You can bring hope where there is despair. Lord, we pray that you would do your work through your word in us for your glory.

In Jesus' name, amen. So first of all, why is ministry so hard? The story of Nehemiah essentially is this. He lives in 445 BC.

He's living in the Persian palace, Susa. He's probably grown up there. He works for the king, very important government job. He hears that Jerusalem, the city of his ancestors, the city of God's people, lies in ruins.

[4 : 03] The people are scattered. They're destitute. God calls Nehemiah to leave the palace and to go bring renewal. Physically rebuild the city of God.

Spiritually begin to rebuild the people of God. As I said a moment ago, as soon as the work starts, so does the opposition. It starts with one antagonist, Sanballat.

And Sanballat hears that construction has started and it says he is furious when he hears that news. That's in verse 1. By verse 7, more enemies have come to the table.

Maybe Sanballat was key in recruiting them. We have a list. We have Sanballat. We have Tobiah and the Arabs. We have the Ammonites and the Ashtodites. So this list, now that's not an arbitrary list.

If we had a map in front of us, it would make a little more sense. Does anyone know where these enemies are located relative to Jerusalem? Yeah, the list literally goes north, east, south, west, right?

[5 : 04] All around Jerusalem, there are enemies who oppose this work. They're literally surrounded. Jerusalem is facing an existential threat.

And the attack starts to come in. And the attack comes from these enemies in various forms. First, there's an enormous amount of mockery and ridicule.

Sanballat says, what are these feeble Jews doing? Tobiah says, yeah, what are they building? If a little fox goes up on it, it's going to crumble down.

This is ancient Near Eastern trash talk. They're being sarcastic. They're being belittling. They're being condescending. As we go forward in the chapter, we see there's a lot of slander.

There's character assassination. You ever heard this? If people realize that some people, when they want to control or manipulate you, if they can't control you, what do they do?

[6 : 01] They go and they try to control what other people think about you. And that's exactly what we see here. They can't control Nehemiah, but they try to control what other people think about Nehemiah.

So we see character assassination and slander. They're spreading all kinds of lies and misinformation. They set out to cause as much confusion as possible. They even threaten violence.

In verse 11, we learn that they're actually planning a surprise military attack. And this is skipping ahead a bit to chapter 6, but it's important to note the opposition doesn't just come from outside, from the non-Jewish world.

In chapter 6, we see that there were a bunch of nobles in Judah who were actually loyal through marriage to Tobiah. So these nobles in Judah are people that Nehemiah assumes are with him, but they're actually acting as double agents.

They're acting as informants. They're reporting everything that Nehemiah is saying and doing to Tobiah. So he's not just got problems outside, he's got problems inside. And then we see the people themselves, they're experiencing profound discouragement and hopelessness and fear and despair.

[7 : 13] In verse 10, in Judah, it was said, the strength of those who bear the burdens is failing. There is too much rubble. By ourselves, we will not be able to rebuild the wall.

If any of you have ever been involved in ministry, if you've ever been involved in trying to solve some of the most complex issues, right, these issues of homelessness or poverty or racial injustice or all of the various things that we, many of you are passionate about and try to work on, you know, problems that you're working on in the developing world.

Those of you who work in other parts of the world trying to bring development and increase the welfare of people in other societies, you know these incredibly thorny, complex problems.

It's so common and easy to look around and just be like, there's too much rubble here. Like, I don't even know where to start. It's just, why even try? This is way beyond our ability.

That's exactly how they feel. Now, there are some surface-level reasons why these groups would oppose Nehemiah. There are political reasons. There are economic reasons.

[8 : 23] The stronger Jerusalem becomes, the weaker their hold is on the area. But the point we really need to focus in on is this. There's a much deeper reason why there is such opposition to this work being done.

The real enemy, as we take the story of Nehemiah and situate it in the larger story of Scripture, the real enemy is not Sanballat. It's not Tobiah.

It's not even the nobles who have betrayed Nehemiah. The real enemy is the same enemy who has always opposed the work of God.

The same enemy who has always opposed the people of God when they're doing the work of God. The enemy that we see from the very beginning of Scripture, the enemy is Satan himself, the great adversary, working through these groups, working through these individuals to oppose the work of God.

Now, they might not even know that they're instruments of that greater evil, but they've been folded in nonetheless. You know, you think about these nobles. Very likely, they believed they were doing God's work.

[9 : 36] They believed maybe that they were doing what was best for Jerusalem, what was best long term. But here's the thing. There's a lot of people maybe in the church who believe that they're doing the right thing for the right reasons.

But if you look at your actions and you realize that you're participating in things like gossip or slander, assuming the worst about other people's motives without knowing all of the facts, right, imputing motives, if you catch yourself using Satan's tactics, it's worth asking whether you're doing Satan's bidding.

Right? So there's this real spiritual enemy working in the background. The Apostle Paul names this in Ephesians chapter 6, for we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

That's the real enemy working through these human agents. Jesus himself says to his disciples in chapter 5, verse 11, no one likes this verse, if you really think about it, if you're a Christian.

Nevertheless, here's what Jesus says. Blessed are you when, not if, when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

[11 : 01] That's exactly what's happening to Nehemiah. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Jesus is saying, God's people have always been reviled, they will be reviled, and that will continue until I come again.

It will continue into the renewal of all things. Blessed are you when others revile you. So Nehemiah cries out in verse 4, hear, O God, for we are despised.

Jesus is saying, hey, if you associate with me, you're going to be despised. It's almost a rule. 2 Timothy 3, verse 12 says it just as clearly, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

He doesn't just say, most of you, or odds are. He says, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. The principle is this, the enemies of God always oppose the people of God when they're doing the work of God.

[12 : 13] If you don't want to be persecuted, if you don't want to be opposed, if you don't want to be reviled, don't say anything, don't do anything. But the minute you begin to try to pursue the work of God for the glory of God, you will meet opposition, and it won't let up.

What are the implications of this? Satan wants us to feel hopeless. Satan wants us to feel discouraged. He wants us to feel like the people in Judah felt.

The strength of those who bear the burdens is failing. It's fading. Many of you are bearing burdens right now, and you feel like, I'm not enough.

I'm not up to this. I just want my life to be easier, to be more convenient. I don't want to have to suffer so much. I don't want it to have to be so hard all the time.

Satan wants us to be divided. He wants us to be angry. He wants us to be bitter. He wants us to be depressed. You see this again and again and again in Scripture. King David, the man after God's own heart, Israel forever looked back and said, that was our high point of our nation.

[13 : 24] It never got better than that, right? He struggled with long bouts of depression. He struggled with deep envy of his enemies. He struggled again and again and again, if you read the Psalms, with feeling like God had abandoned him, turned his back on him.

Elijah, right after his major victory over the prophets of Baal, right after, I mean, you would think if you called fire down from heaven that consumed everything, after the prophets tried and tried and tried and they did nothing, and you just pray to God and bam, fire comes down, and everybody's like, whoa, this guy, you know, and then he immediately falls into a deep, deep, deep, deep depression.

It gets so bad that he wants to end his own life. He's suicidal. People like Hannah, Naomi, Jeremiah, Moses, they all struggle with self-doubt, discouragement, inadequacy, despair, all throughout their ministry.

And some of the greatest theologians and pastors and missionaries and thought leaders throughout history, same thing, Martin Luther, Hannah Allen, David Brainerd, William Cowper, Charles Spurgeon, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King Jr., all struggled with deep depression and discouragement all through their ministry.

It's no coincidence. It's what the Bible says is gonna happen. You know, in January of this year, for those of you who were here, we planted a flag of sorts. We closed on a building in the Shaw neighborhood.

[14 : 51] We're gonna make good on our commitment to love the city long term. We're taking the ministry that has been happening and we're looking forward and we're doing what we can to establish a multi-generational ministry that will outlive all of us and continue to be a center of gospel proclamation and worship in the heart of the city, in the heart of a city that touches all the cities of the world.

It is no coincidence, in my opinion, that this has also been the hardest year of ministry since we started the church. I'll just be totally honest.

I have never personally felt more discouragement in almost 18 years of ministry. I have, in the last year, several times come to a place of thinking, I don't know if I can do this anymore.

It's been that discouraging. And I know many of you, maybe the majority of you, are also feeling discouragement. One way or another, because of the things that you're dealing with in your life.

I know that there are relationships that have broken down. I know that there has been gossip and slander, people assuming the worst about people's motives. I know that we've endured some of the most complicated and painful situations we have ever faced as a community.

[16 : 14] Make no mistake, Satan does not want us to exist. And if we do exist, he wants us to be inert, passive, peacekeeper, not peacemaker, but peacekeeper.

Just go along to get along. He wants us to give up. He wants us to believe that this is too hard. He wants us to be overwhelmed by the rubble. He wants us to spend all of our time fighting each other instead of him.

Why is ministry so hard? Because we have an adversary who prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. That's why ministry is hard.

Now what can we do about it? How can we persevere? This is where Nehemiah chapter 4 isn't just a hard text to read because it tells us the hard truth that we need to hear, but it also offers a profound vision of perseverance in the face of adversity.

So we're going to draw out a few things that I hope and pray will help us in this season of our life together. Number one, this. Understand the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

[17 : 24] Understand our job and then understand God's job. This is a theme that shows up all throughout Scripture. It's one of the major themes in the book of Nehemiah. Verse 9 captures it.

And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night. And I love that. We prayed to God and we set a guard.

We did both. You know, we have a tendency to think, shouldn't it be one or the other? In other words, you know, if you're praying and you're trusting that God's going to protect you, why do you need to set a guard?

Why post a watch? Don't you trust God? And if you post a watch, does that mean you didn't really believe that God could do anything? Does that, can you do both? For that matter, why do we even need walls around the city?

Why not just build our houses and live in them and trust that God's going to keep us safe? Why do we need walls and gates? This dichotomy, this binary way of thinking is very prevalent.

[18 : 25] But it's not representative of what Scripture actually shows us. All throughout Scripture, we see a much more beautiful, nuanced view. We see this intertwining of divine sovereignty and human responsibility and how they work together.

How at the same time, God is in control of everything. God is in control of the outcomes. And yet somehow, our choices matter and our actions matter. And there are real, live consequences that result from our actions.

You know, it's interesting, in places like Isaiah chapter 38, you see this interplay. King Hezekiah becomes very sick, presumably because of an infected boil. And Isaiah comes to him and says, King, you need to put your affairs in order because you're going to die.

And Hezekiah is desperate. He prays to God to heal him. And God, through Isaiah, says to him, okay, I'm going to heal you.

And I'm going to actually extend your life for 15 more years. And then God tells Isaiah to make a poultice out of figs and apply it to the infected area.

[19 : 37] And Hezekiah is healed. And he praises God for healing him. But God works through the poultice to do it. And you say, well, was it the fig poultice?

Fig, that was a common medicinal remedy back in the day, right? Was it the figs or was it God? The Bible would say yes. Yes. Right?

God has such control over history and yet He is so intimately involved in our lives that He's able to work through our actions without being constrained by them.

See, some people say, well, God's already made up His mind anyway. It doesn't matter what we do. God's going to do what He's going to do. That's not what the Bible says. The Bible says not God works despite our choices only, nor does it say that God is constrained by our choices, as though God's kind of biting His nails saying, I hope they make the right choice because if they don't, there's nothing I can do.

It says that God is able to work through our choices somehow in a way that doesn't thwart His will. His outcomes are guaranteed and sure, but they come through our choices.

[20 : 47] When it comes to dealing with opposition, here's what this means, that we should pray continually, we should pray continually, trusting that God is with us, and we should also take whatever measures necessary to care for ourselves and our families.

Right? As Jesus says when He sends out His disciples, we should be innocent as doves, right? Trusting in the Lord, relying on the Lord to provide everything. We should also be wise and shrewd.

They're not opposed to one another. So you look at Nehemiah. He prays and he posts a guard. He says, I want you to work with one hand and I want you to hold a weapon with the other. He splits them up so some of them are keeping watch while others build.

And all the while they're praying. They're praying, they're praying, they're praying, and every time he gets a chance, Nehemiah is saying, it is God who is keeping us safe. It is not us. God is the one that we trust in, not ourselves.

And you see this beautiful balance revealed. So listen, if you're severely depressed, pray. Pray every day for God to heal you. But also consider going to a competent therapist.

[22 : 00] And there's some really great medication out there that could make a huge difference in your life. and you should thank God it exists. It saves lives. If you want to be able to contend for your faith when people question you, you should pray and maybe consider studying and learning apologetics.

There are some great arguments out there. I remember when I was a clinician in Boston before I came down here and I remember I was the only counselor in my outpatient clinic and they gave me an opportunity to present as a Christian my vision of counseling as a Christian therapist.

And I remember I stood up in front of the entire clinical team during a staff meeting and I opened my mouth and I got two sentences out and then a guy in the front row who was an atheist, none of them were Christians, a guy in the front row just comes at me and he throws every argument he possibly can at me for why everything I believe and then everybody else started joining in too and they started coming at me with what about this and what about this and what about this, right?

And I remember looking around and thinking I'm overwhelmed. That was the thing that inspired me many years ago to start digging into what is the reasonable foundation for the things that we believe?

Is this a blind leap of faith or are there actually meaningful? And I begin to discover actually this is an incredibly thoughtful faith that has been a great source of hope to some of the smartest people throughout history and there's a wonderful treasure trove if you're willing to dig in that helps us connect mind and heart in our faith, right?

[23 : 33] Now if you do that, does that mean you don't trust God as he says to give you the words when you need them? No. It means God works through all of it. If you want to do ministry in the city, we pray.

We need to pray every day that God is blessing what we're doing, that God is with us, that God goes before us. But we also should be working to develop the absolute best strategies we possibly can for doing effective ministry in a place like D.C.

in 2024. Not the same strategies that worked in the 1970s or the 1920s, right? Or the mid-1800s. Strategies for here and now, for this win.

So we need to trust in the dual reality of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. I remember this came up a lot when in the early days of COVID, we were all being told to wear masks, you know?

And there were some Christians who were like, well, if you wear a mask, you're not trusting God, you know? And I'm like, well, if there's a chance that I'm going to get somebody next to me sick and they're going to die, I'm going to wear the mask. It doesn't mean I don't trust the Lord, you know?

[24 : 38] I'm going to put on the fig poultice, you know? And I'm going to trust and hope and pray that if God wants to work through that means he can. They don't have to be opposed to one another. Divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

Number two, fear God, not other people. How do you persevere? Fear God, not other people. A lot of opposition these days, in our society, thankfully, most of us don't have to worry about physical violence.

Praise God for that. But a lot of the opposition that we face is going to come through mocking, through ridicule, through threats from other people. I love Nehemiah's encouragement to his people when they are filled with fear.

He says, do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord who is great and awesome. Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord who is great and awesome.

In other words, he's saying, remember how big God is and how small they are. That's what he's saying. Excessive fear is a sign typically that our view of God has gotten too small.

[25 : 45] And if you're afraid of other people, it means that your view of them has gotten too big. Right? There's a great book about this. When people are big and God is small, we have excessive fear.

That's typically what's happening. Nehemiah's saying, listen, in those moments, you need to remember the bigness of God, the greatness of God. He's bigger, he's more powerful than anything you might fear.

For those of you in leadership, especially if you are here and you lead a ministry of some kind, you're a leader in your organization, you will never make everybody happy.

It will never happen. If you have more than one person in your organization, if it's you and two other people, one of them will love you.

One of them will profoundly disagree with what you're doing. It's a guaranteed principle. Even Jesus himself could not please everybody.

[26 : 47] What makes us think we can do any better? Jesus never chased after anyone's approval. Again and again and again, people said false things about him.

They falsely accused him. They would misrepresent him. They would walk away and tell other people horrible things about him. He never once tracked any of the Pharisees down and said, I heard what you said about me and I just want to set the record straight.

That's not what I said. That's not what I did. You cannot control what other people think about you. Listen, you need to learn this if you don't know it.

You cannot control what other people think about you. If someone does not like you, if someone does not like what you represent, it is not your job to try to change their perception of you.

Their internal world is their responsibility. It's not your responsibility. Actually, what other people think about you, that is not your business.

[27 : 50] business. It's their business. Mind your own business. For all you know, their thoughts and opinions of you have nothing to do with you.

For all you know, they are projecting things onto you that have way more to do with them than they do you. But you don't know because it's not your internal world. You can't know.

Don't waste time and energy trying to manage somebody else's internal world. If you're a leader and you go around chasing everybody's approval, you're never going to get anything done.

You're going to create an insecure system. People are not going to trust you. And things will probably get worse in your organization. You know, my favorite definition of leadership is this.

Leadership is the art of disappointing people at a rate they can handle. Leadership is the art of disappointing people at a rate they can handle. Commit yourself to doing the work that you believe God has called you to do.

[28 : 53] Commit yourself to loving and serving and pleasing Him and Him alone. And as Nehemiah says, remember the Lord. Some people will be with you. Some people won't. It's not up to you to change their perception of you.

So that's the first two things. Divine sovereignty and human responsibility, number one. Number two, fear the Lord and not other people. Number three, the final one. Trust in the Lord who fights for us.

Trust in the Lord who fights for us. Verse 20, we see in Nehemiah's ultimate source of hope. He says, keep working no matter what. Keep going. Keep building because we know that our God will fight for us.

That is so fantastic. But what we need to understand now at our point in the story is that we read this differently than the way Nehemiah did. Even though he says this, Nehemiah had no way of knowing how true that statement would be and how it would ultimately be applied to God's people because at this point in history, Nehemiah still believes that the Jews are the good guys and the greatest enemies are the non-Jews.

They're the other people who oppose the Jews and they oppose God. So their world is still divided into good guys, the Jews, the God's people and everybody else. And so that's why Nehemiah prays and says in verse 5, hey, do you hear what they're saying about us?

[30 : 24] Lord, don't cover their guilt. Don't forgive them. Don't even give them an opportunity to be restored. He says, let not their sin be blotted out from your sight.

He says, remember what they said about us and about you and bring justice. Smite them. He prayed for God to fight the evil out there, the enemies of God in the world.

It would take hundreds more years before the Jews would learn the truth. The Apostle Paul, one of the most exemplary Jewish religious leaders, figures, if you ever wanted a person to, an example to live by in terms of moral excellence, it's hard to beat the Apostle Paul in his early years.

Here's what he writes. In Romans chapter 3, both Jews and Greeks are under sin. As it is written, none is righteous, no, not one.

He's saying, you know, it always said this in the Scripture, we just missed it. No one understands, no one seeks for God, all have turned aside, together they have become worthless, no one does good, not even one.

[31 : 35] same realization hit Alexander Solzhenitsyn when he was, he thought he was one of the good guys and then he got caught criticizing Stalin, he ends up in a gulag and his world breaks down.

He used to think he was a good guy and all those people over there were the bad guys and his life was transformed when he found himself numbered among the wicked. And he writes, the line separating good and evil passes not through states, which is what he used to think, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through every human heart, through all human hearts.

In other words, the God that we truly need, friends, the God that we truly need is not a God who will fight for us against the evil out there. The God we need is the God who will fight for us against the evil in here.

In us. But you understand the paradox of that, right? How can God fight for us if he's fighting evil in us?

How can God fight for us if the evil is in us? And that's why we need to understand that the entire story of Nehemiah actually points to this even greater story.

[32 : 50] Someone much greater than Nehemiah. Who didn't just leave a palace to come and rebuild a city. He left the throne of heaven to come and restore and renew the world. And not only is he the God who fights for us, he's actually the God at our point in history who fought for us.

The real battle has already been fought and won. On the cross, Jesus Christ fought the greatest battle ever staged, ever waged against the true enemy.

Satan and sin and death, taking the sin of the world on himself, dying in our place, and through that defeat, he won. He achieved victory.

He defeated Satan. He defeated sin and death once and for all. The cross tells us that the greatest battle has already been fought and won. And it tells us that the victory is ours.

It is the outworking of that victory within which we live now. And one day, the good work that has been begun in us and in the world, according to the apostle Paul, will be brought to completion.

[34 : 01] So now, God is able to offer forgiveness and renewal not only to people like Nehemiah, but even people like Sanballat and Tobiah.

Even people like us who realize that apart from the grace of the gospel, we are numbered among the enemies of God. So for those of us in ministry, for those of us who are currently in ministry, leading in ministry, who maybe after today will decide to join a ministry, because I know you're raring to go at this point, keep going.

Keep working. Keep, no matter how hard it gets, if you believe that God has called you to do the work that you're doing, then keep going.

We labor for a God who fights for us. And because he fought for us, we know the victory and the fruit are secure, even if we don't see it right this moment.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for the finished work, the battle you fought for us on the cross, and we pray that that would be the foundation of our hope, that we know that as we labor in your kingdom, Lord, as we may feel overwhelmed by the rubble in our lives around us, Lord, we pray that you would remind us of the assurance we have in the gospel, Lord, that no matter how hard things get, no matter if we feel like we need to see no fruit now, that Lord, one day all of this good work that you have begun will come to completion.

[35 : 44] One day we will see it, one day it will make sense, one day all of the brokenness of the world will be eradicated. Lord, we pray in that hope, we pray in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Beweg bin. Amen. Amen.