

Nehemiah 6:1-19

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[0 : 00] Good morning. My name is Andrea and I serve in the youth ministry. And if you are a child ages three through second grade, you may walk quietly to the back of the auditorium to meet your teachers for class. And parents, there is a nursery for children ages zero to two available throughout the service. And please pick up your children at their classrooms when the service ends. All right. Our scripture reading for today is taken from the book of Nehemiah chapter six, verses one through 19 on page 442 of the white Bibles.

Again, our scripture reading is Nehemiah chapter six, verses one through 19, found on page 442 of the white Bibles. Please remain standing for the reading of God's word. Now in Sinballad and Tobiah and Geshen, the Arab and the rest of our enemies heard that I had built the wall and that there was no breach left in it. Although up to that time, I had not set up the doors and the gates. Sinballad and Geshen said to me, saying, come and let us meet together at Hepkafirim in the plain of Ono. But they intended to do me harm. And I sent messengers to them saying, I am doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you?

And they set up, they sent to me four times in this way. And I answered them in the same manner. In the same way, Sinballad for the fifth time sent his servant to me with an open letter in his hand. In it was written, it is reported among the nations and Geshem also says it, that you and the Jews intend to rebel. That is why you are building the wall. And according to these reports, you wish to become their king. And you have also set up prophets to proclaim concerning you in Jerusalem.

[1 : 52] There is a king in Judah. And now the king will hear of these reports. So now come and let us take counsel together. Then I sent to him saying, no such things as you say have been done here or have been done for you are inventing them out of your own mind. For they all wanted to frighten us thinking their hands will drop from the work and it will not be done. But now, O God, strengthen my hands.

Now when I went into the house and Semaiah, the son of Delilah, son of Mehatabel, who was confined to his house, to his home, he said, let us meet together in the house of God within the temple.

Let us close the doors of the temple for they are coming to kill you. They're coming to kill you by night. But I said, should such a man as I run away, and what man should I come, should I, sorry, and what man such as I could go into the temple and live, I will not go in. And I understood and saw that God had not sent him for, but he had pronounced the prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sembalat had hired him. For this purpose, he was hired that I should be afraid and act in this way and sin. And so they could get me a bad name in order to taunt me. Remember Tobiah and Sembalat.

Oh my God, according to these things that they did, and also the prophetess, Noabidiah, and the rest of the prophets who wanted to make me afraid. So the wall was finished on the 25th day of the month of Elul in 52 days. And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem, for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God. Moreover, in those days, the nobles of Judah sent many letters to Tobiah, and Tobiah's letters came to them. For many in Judah were bound by oath to him, because he was the son-in-law of Sekaniah, the son of Ara. And his son, Johanahana, then had taken the daughter of the son of Barakiah as his wife. Also they spoke of his good deeds in my presence and reported my words to him, and Tobiah sent letters to make me afraid. This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God. You may be seated. Thank you. Just a few short days ago, my best friend growing up exchanged his faith for sight.

[4 : 42] What I'm trying to say is that while we were called to worship today through Psalm 100, where we by faith are to enter into the gates of the Lord, he now has done that by sight. Let me put it as clearly as I can. Whatever Nehemiah was doing in the rebuilding of a wall for Jerusalem, it was but a temporary visible symbol of an eternal city wherein God dwells, to which we will all go. Even Revelation 21 speaks of Jerusalem not rising in the midst of Nehemiah and his members, but descending as the very city of God with four gates and the gates everlastingly open, open, for there is no fear that an intruder or an ungodly one would enter. Why do I begin in this way?

Simply because we need to know what life was like for Nehemiah and his congregation in the days just before the gates were hung. I'm asking, what was going on after the wall was built, but before the punch list was completed or the occupancy permits were in hand? The opening verse of chapter 6 certainly places you at that very moment. Sambalot, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab, and the rest of our enemies heard that I had built the wall. There was no breach left in it. Parentheses, very important. Although up to that time I had not yet set up the doors in the gates.

In fact, by the time you and I arrived here next week, we will be at chapter 7 and verse 1 and we will be beyond that moment. We will read that the doors had been set up and gatekeepers had actually been appointed.

So the text that sits before us outlines life for the people of God before the gates were hung. With literary subtlety, I want to explore what life is like for the church when the church. When the work is done, but not over. When it is finished, but not complete.

[7 : 35] Get this, I want to pause for a week between that which is already and that which is not yet.

What can we expect to find in the church between the completion of the wall and the hanging of the gates?

You might expect to have read a chapter where the people of God are flourishing. After all, an eight foot wide wall had been constructed in the course of 52 days.

You might expect to read a chapter where the triumphant notes of faith are embraced by all. You might think that the people were upbeat and they had sent members to the bakery to order the cake for the celebration.

Surprisingly though, and this is where the text meets us today. Nehemiah and his congregation are fighting to hold on to their faith.

[8 : 56] Nehemiah and his congregation are fighting to hold on to their feet.

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Where fear could cause the gospel work to be discontinued. The key verse is right there in the summation of verse 9.

For they all wanted to frighten us, thinking their hands will drop from the work and it will not be done.

In verses 2-5, there were four and then a fifth time where Nehemiah was tempted to discontinue the work.

[10 : 39] Let me put it to you the way you feel it. To quit your faith. He had received a sequence of emails that had troubled his mind.

For these others were in communication with him, asking him to pull aside from that which God had called him to in persistence.

And to walk away from it in order to meet them. Of course, they had intended him harm. And then he goes on to indicate that fifth occasion where you actually get the detail of the letter that arrived in his box.

And it is an accusation in verses 6-7 that they are going to tell the king of Persia. That what Nehemiah is really on about in the building of a wall is the making of a name for himself.

Indeed, he intends to be a king, it says. In other words, it's an accusation of sedition.

[11 : 56] That God's people securing a context in a rebellious world will be read by the outsider as challenging the rule of law.

Challenging outside external governing authorities. And they're going to make it known that the continuance of this kind of work in our kind of kingdom will not be tolerated.

I love what Nehemiah does. He says, I will not come down. And I love that he calls this a great work.

You know, when the wall gets done and the people that had seen the temple before took a look at it, they wept tears.

And the tears were not tears of joy. The tears were how far short this wall appeared in contrast to the one that had originally been in play.

[13:07] A great work. A great work. Nehemiah saw it even so.

He wouldn't stop working. He wouldn't quit his faithful encounter out of fear of personal harm.

It is said that after Michelangelo died, someone found in his studio a piece of paper on which he had written a note to his art student, Antonio.

And the note was written in his own handwriting in old age. And this is said, Draw, Antonio. Draw. Draw. And do not waste time.

In other words, continue the work. Don't stop that which you have set out to do. It is said that Luther of the Reformation worked so hard that when he went to bed, he literally fell into bed.

[14:14] In one account, it says that he didn't change his sheets for a year. Sounds like a freshman undergraduate student in a male dorm to me. Moody's bedtime prayer on occasion was, Lord, I am tired.

Amen. Calvin's biographers marvel at his output. Wesley was said to ride 60 or 70 miles a day and on an average preach three sermons in 24 hours.

And when Alexander McLaren went into his study, in respect of the principle, he would take off his slippers and put on working man's boots because he knew that a minister of God has to be a man at work.

Imagine that. This persistent, faithful effort in the midst of an external distraction that would cause you to fear and to quit.

What's the need? I find it interesting that there's an ironic relationship here between Nehemiah and an itinerant preacher named Jesus who will follow long after in the scriptures.

[15:30] In other words, there's a comparison that can be made between the accusation that comes to Nehemiah and by way of contrast, what Jesus himself does.

See, Nehemiah is charged with being a king. And as a king, it will be, word will get out to human authorities that will squelch his movement.

And what Nehemiah says is, I have no intention to be a king. But Jesus, check this out, Jesus, in Luke 23, verses 1 and 2, we read, Then the whole company of them arose and brought him before Pilate, and they began to accuse him, saying, We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he is himself Christ, a king.

And Pilate asked him, Are you the king of the Jews? And he answered, You have said so. In other words, Jesus will take unto himself kingly authority, having just secured his entrance into the city through Palm Sunday and that triumphal injury.

In other words, what Nehemiah is doing here is a precursor to what Jesus will actually fulfill. I find that ironic in all of its glory.

[17:01] That even Jesus, on the cusp of a work completed, was met with the accusation that he was seditious and a threat in hopes that he would himself quit the work that the Lord had given him to do.

And what about you? What about me? I find it interesting that the hymn writers actually take psalms that were originally fulfilled in Christ, and they throw them forward right in upon the church.

Isaiah 41, verse 10. Fear not, for I am with you. Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you. I will help you. I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

This is a word of the prophet prophetically given that applies to Jesus, Israel's servant king. And he is to feed on the word of God.

Fear not. I am with you. Do not be dismayed. I will strengthen you. Help you. I will surely give thee aid.

[18:17] You can already hear the hymn, if those of you who grew up in the church. Fear not, I am with you. Oh, be not dismayed, for I am thy God, and will still give thee aid.

That's it. And so the hymn writer throws upon the people of God Isaiah's prophetic word that strengthened the servant of God so that when Jesus himself was faced with the accusation of sedition, he stayed true, and so must you.

That's what your life looks like before the hanging of the gate. Fear meant to make gospel work fall into discontinuance.

But that's not all. Look at 10 through 16. I wish the editors hadn't broken it at 14, but they did. But 10 through 16, that's not the only fear that's present.

There's also a fear that would cause the gospel worker to do something that will discredit the name of his Lord.

[19 : 36] This is interesting. This house, verse 10, that Nehemiah is dwelling in, is evidently the home of a prophet in Israel who is related to the priesthood and its function.

You know that because he's actually pronouncing a prophecy, or Nehemiah viewed it that way, in verse 12. So not only is there a kingly accusation against Nehemiah, there is a prophetic word that tempts him to take on a priestly function.

There's this union here between these Old Testament offices of a prophet, a priest, and a king. And what this man says is, look, there is a plan out to get you.

Come with me. Let's go into the temple and lock ourselves in. The image is of Nehemiah, a layman, walking right into the very holy of holies in an effort to be protected from the onslaught of a threat. And Nehemiah says, would such a man as I run, first of all, but would I dare go into the temple? It's not reserved for me. He's aware of things like Numbers 18, verse 7, where an outsider, someone who's not part of the priestly realm, is not supposed to walk into there lest they would die in the face of God.

[21 : 07] Let me put it to you this way. If the first movement, what Nehemiah needed was a strengthening of his hands to the work, verse 9, the second movement of fear would put him on his knees in prayer.

This is fascinating to me. Look at verse 13. For this purpose he was hired, that I should be afraid, and act in this way, and sin, so they could give me a bad name.

Until you arrive at heaven's gates, your faith will be embattled. It will be embattled by external forces that feel you are a threat to what is taking place in the kingdom of this world, and you are to continue on in faith.

It will be embattled by you trying to take up your own cause to secure your own safety. I hope you see the irony of the way this text moves.

He strengthens his hands to stay in faithful engagement, and he falls on his knees lest his hands do something they should not do.

[22 : 32] And even here, there's an ironic contrast with Jesus who will come later. For Jesus, unlike Nehemiah, will walk headlong into his own substitutionary death.

The writer to the Hebrews says that he actually walks up into a heavenly city, into a heavenly temple, into a heavenly holy of holies, and sheds his blood there as a substitution so that all might have access to God.

Nehemiah will not do what Jesus himself ultimately fulfills. And so what do you do when you are tempted and afraid and feel that you need to do something to secure your own safety?

Do something, it says here literally, to preserve your own life. What does he do? Verse 14, he goes to prayer.

Intercession. This is the wonderful way of faith until we arrive at heaven. Persistent effort and dependent prayer.

[24 : 00] So the wall's finished. 52 days. And look at the irony of 16. All those people that were out to make him afraid are now greatly afraid.

Their fear rises because his persistent faith has been evidenced.

I love verse 17 and following, the moreover. Just this little tagline at the end of the text and therefore a beginning of my own conclusion of the sermon.

For you to arrive at heaven, you need to know that fear might cause gospel work to be discontinued. Fear might cause a gospel worker to do something that dishonors God's name.

And here, in the little moreover at the end, the persistence and presence of fear is there because there is continually disloyalty within gospel ranks.

[25 : 11] the men of Judah were actually in league with these guys. They had already taken an oath.

They were divided men. They were playing the political game on one end and the spiritual game on the other end. In fact, they were feeding Sanballat everything that was going on in the midst of the assembly.

What will the life of the church look like until the gates are hung? Know this. The wheat and the tares grow up together.

And be careful lest you try to root it all out ahead of time and have the purest of all assemblies, but disrupt the seedling that actually is flourishing and learning to grow in faith.

What is the life of the church until we enter into His gates and exchange our faith for sight?

[26 : 27] what will define the life of God's people until that heavenly Jerusalem descends and we enter into the presence of our Lord everlastingly?

This much Nehemiah 6 has made clear. Expect nothing less than a battle for your faith. to the very end.

You will be frightened to discontinue before arriving home. You may be fearful and therefore do something that actually dishonors His name.

You may be deceived at some points and actually and disloyalty undo His work in the world.

Fear or faith the war is on until the gates are hung.

[27 : 51] don't expect cake till then. Our heavenly Father as we look at this book and we consider its call we have to say that our faith is also embattled.

many here today feel ground down or pressured from outside influences or chased by a need to secure for ourselves that which only our Lord secures in Your presence or unwittingly falling into habitual patterns of playing two ends of the same stick.

Lord, may we not discontinue. May we not dishonor Your name. May we not be disloyal to Your cause.

may we fight our fears with persistent faith until the doors are open to us and we see Christ alone the reward of our labor.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.