

When the Opposition Won't Quit

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, church. Our sermon text today is Nehemiah chapter 6. That's page 373 in the Pew Bible. Go ahead and turn there with me.

We'll be looking at that passage together today. Nehemiah chapter 6, page 373. Let me just mention before we get started that there's water in the back, or at least there was water in the back. If you need a drink, there's a water fountain out in the foyer. Downstairs also is an overflow space. The secret is it's a little cooler down there.

So if it's just getting a little hot, feel free to go downstairs. You can still follow along with the video and the audio downstairs. It's a little cooler. Well, let me pray for us as we come to God's word, and then I'll read the text for us.

Let's pray. Oh, Father, we've just sung that you would be our vision. You would be the heart of our hearts. You would be the target towards which we aim.

[1 : 08] You would be the goal, the end of all that we do. God, thank you that you give yourself to us, that you reveal yourself to us, that you allow yourself to be known and to be loved.

And so you draw us up out of our sin and our selfishness and our concern with mere passing things to find our hope and our delight and our home in you, the eternal God.

Lord, would you please bless the reading and the preaching of your word this morning so that you would be our vision above all.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. So, Nehemiah chapter 6. Now, when Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem 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, Sanballat and Geshem sent to me saying, come, let us meet together at Hakafarim in the plain of Ono.

But they intended to do me harm. And I sent messengers to them saying, I'm doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you?

[2 : 32] And they sent to me four times in this way and I answered them in the same manner. In the same way, Sanballat for the fifth time sent his servant to me with an open letter in his hand and 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, 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, 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 of Shemaiah, the son of Deliah, son of Mehetabel, who was confined to his home, he said, let us meet together in the house of God within the temple.

[3 : 41] Let us close the doors of the temple, for they're 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 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, but he had pronounced the prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat 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 give me a bad name in order to taunt me. Remember Sanballat and Tobiah, O my God, according to these things that they did, and also the prophetess Noah-Diah 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 felt 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 Shekariah, the son of Ere, and his son Jehohanan had taken the daughter of Meshulam, the son of Barakai, as his wife.

[5 : 02] Also, they spoke of his good deeds in my presence and reported my words to him, and Tobiah sent letters to make me afraid. Well, sometimes the opposition just won't quit.

Remember, the year is 445 BC. Nehemiah has arrived in Jerusalem from Susa, the capital of the Persian Empire, to rebuild the city walls of Jerusalem and to restore the honor of the city and of the people.

And as chapter 6 opens, you see there that the work is actually almost done. You see that in verse 1. Everything is finished except for the setting up of the doors and the gates.

But just as Nehemiah is about to cross the finish line, the enemies of the project just won't quit. You remember back in chapter 4 that they came against the people as a whole with taunts and threats. But here, it gets personal. Now, they're after Nehemiah himself. And it gets deceptive. The conspiracies start coming from every angle, don't they?

[6 : 18] It's political in verses 1 through 9. It's religious in verses 10 through 14. It's social in verses 17 through 19. And in each scheme against Nehemiah, the overarching aim is to make him afraid.

In verse 9, they want to frighten me. Verses 10 and 14, that I should be afraid. Verse 19, Tobiah sent letters to make me afraid. Because if they could frighten Nehemiah, then he would stop the work on the wall and maybe even do something sinful or shameful out of fear, which would then give his enemies ammunition to ridicule him and taunt him and ruin his reputation in the eyes of the people.

Fear, you see, is one of our spiritual enemy's greatest weapons.

In Nehemiah's day and in our own, the world would love to make us afraid and get us to give up our allegiance to Christ and go against his word.

Take a look at verses 10 through 14. There, it was physical fears, right? They're coming to kill you, Nehemiah. Now, many Christians around the world today do face physical intimidation.

[7 : 44] In verses 1 through 9, it's professional fears. You better come meet with us, Nehemiah, or we're going to tell the king of Persia that you're planning a rebellion. Now, there's no faster way to lose your job as a governor in the Persian Empire, which is what Nehemiah was, than to be charged with treason.

But we can face professional fears today, can't we? Will my allegiance to Christ put my work, my job, my profession in jeopardy?

Will I be overlooked for that promotion? Will I lose out on that big client? Will I be Nehemiah's enemies, Tobiah, has apparently married into the noble upper classes of Judah.

And so, from that position of sort of social leverage, he can pull all sorts of strings and call in all sorts of favors and make Nehemiah's life pretty miserable. I think social fears may be the most prevalent for us here in our setting.

What will my neighbors, my friends, my family think of me if they know I've become a Christian? Will I always be on the outside, always ridiculed, always excluded, always lonely?

[9 : 12] How about you this morning, friend? What ongoing fears are you experiencing from the world where God has placed you?

And Nehemiah, throughout this chapter, through the ongoing conspiracies and plots, amazingly, he doesn't give up and he doesn't give in.

In fact, in the face of all that, he shows incredible wisdom, incredible courage, and incredible endurance. How about us? How can we have that same sort of wisdom and courage and endurance today?

Well, I think there are two things that we see in this passage that can help us keep going in the face of fear. First, a God-centered perspective.

And second, a God-centered prayer life. A God-centered perspective and a life of God-centered prayer. So let's take a look at what a God-centered perspective looks like.

[10 : 26] On the one hand, we need to maintain a God-centered perspective of our work. Look at the end of verse 3, when Sambalot, the governor of neighboring Samaria, tries to draw Nehemiah away from Jerusalem under the pretense of a meeting.

It seems that meetings were used in all sorts of ways in the ancient world, just as they are today. Come on, we're going to have another meeting. Oh, my, my. Nehemiah, what does he say? He says, I'm doing a great work and I cannot come down.

Now, that's a very shrewd answer, isn't it? He doesn't just tell Sambalot to get lost. No, he maintains his professional dignity and says, actually, I have more pressing work to do right now. But it's not just a shrewd answer, it's also a true answer.

It is a great work that he's involved in. But maybe not in the world's eyes. After all, in the world's eyes, at this point in history, Nehemiah is just stacking rocks around an insignificant town in a province that's literally called Beyond the River.

It doesn't sound more backwater than that, does it? Where do you live? Beyond the River. Have fun with that. But in God's perspective, it is a great work.

[11 : 42] It's advancing the kingdom of God. It's restoring the people of God. It's honoring the name of God. Now, you may not think that your everyday work, your calling, is much in the world's eyes.

But friend, any lawful work done as unto God with a heart to honor Him is a great work. Maybe you're a stay-at-home parent.

Maybe you're an investment banker. Maybe you're a construction manager. Maybe you're an admin assistant. Maybe you're a craftsman, a plumber, an electrician. Maybe you're an Uber driver. If you're a follower of Christ, if you are engaged in your work for the sake of Christ with an eye towards His glory, it is a great work.

And this is especially true when it comes to our calling as a member of Christ's church. Yes, in the world's eyes, what we're doing here right now seems fairly insignificant.

Singing a few songs. Reading a few passages from an old religious text. Saying a few encouraging words. And so, if things get a little uncomfortable out in the world, if some social pressure heats up, if some fears crop up at work or in your neighborhood or in your dorm room, you know, it can feel like no big deal to just stop coming to church for a while.

[13 : 17] But in God's perspective, the church is no mere social club. It's the very body of Christ on earth.

It's the very dwelling place of His Holy Spirit. The church gathered around and proclaiming the message of the Bible in word and in prayer and in preaching and in sacrament.

The church engaged in that, friends, is the very voice of God to the world. You are doing a great work.

Don't let the world frighten you into thinking otherwise. But Nehemiah also has a God-centered perspective, not just of his work, but of himself.

In verses 10 through 14, we see that a certain priest named Shemaiah has actually been hired by Sanballat and Tobiah to give a false prophecy to Nehemiah.

[14 : 22] And we actually see in verse 14 at the end of that paragraph that there were others doing the same thing. Apparently, there was a prophetess, Noah-diah, and some other prophets who were apparently taking bribes from Nehemiah's enemies and then lying to him to make him afraid and to do something shameful.

Shemaiah tells Nehemiah to go hide in the temple with him, to go inside, to shut the doors because they're coming to kill you. But in verse 11, Nehemiah says, Should such a man as I run away? And what man such as I could go into the temple and live? I will not go in. Now, we see in Nehemiah's response that on the one hand, a God-centered perspective of our own selves gives us great boldness.

Who am I to run away, Nehemiah says. Now, Nehemiah is the governor of Judah. The king of Persia himself gave him that job.

Nehemiah has soldiers and servants at his disposal. But is that all that gives Nehemiah his boldness? No. You see, Nehemiah isn't just known and called by the king of Persia.

[15 : 35] He's known by the king of the universe, the creator, the Lord. That's where Nehemiah's boldness comes from. But on the other hand, this God-centered perspective of his own self brings not just boldness but also a deep humility.

How can such a man as I go into the temple and live? You see, God's law permitted only the priests to enter into the temple itself. Everyone could worship in the courts, but only a certain particular group in Israel, the priestly class, could go into the temple.

Nehemiah, you see, was humble before God. In other words, his rightful awe and fear of God was what helped him overcome the fear of human beings.

But how can you and I have that same kind of boldness and humility? We are no Nehemiah, right?

There have been about a hundred books written about the book of Nehemiah about godly leadership, and most of them you read and you think, oh man, that's a tough act to follow.

But friends, consider what we know in light of the gospel, in the light of Christ. What is the message of the Bible that the creator of the universe, the Lord, the one before whom every knee will bow as we sung at the beginning of our service, sent his only son, his only son, to come die for you, to rescue you from sin, to make you his son, his daughter, to make you his heir?

[17:21] Is there any greater source of confidence and boldness than that? You have been chosen not by some mere earthly king, but by the king of kings.

He's looked upon you and said, I'm choosing you and sending my son for you. And yet, what humility at the same time.

Because your sins were so great and your failures so deep that the son of God had to die for you.

You see, the necessity of the cross for our sins ought to give us a proper humility.

But the willingness of God to take up the cross for you, it should fill us with an unshakable boldness.

Brothers and sisters, do you know that kind of humble boldness, that sort of bold humility, that right, humble confidence before God that can make you withstand any fears from the world?

It's there. It's for you in the cross of Christ. Stop trusting in yourself and put your trust in him. Find in him the forgiveness of your sins and the love of your heavenly father and the indwelling, powerful presence of the Holy Spirit.

[18:48] It's there for you to take hold of. It's not just for Nehemiah's, it's for all of us. So then a God-centered perspective of our work and of ourselves will help us to endure through the fears that the world throws at us.

But if we stopped there, we'd be missing something critical. How does what we know in our heads, this God-centered perspective, get down into our hearts? How does the truth of our relationship with God become a lived experience that actually changes our lives?

Become a lived reality that actually allows us to carry on, to be wise, to be courageous in the midst of a world that wants us to live in fear? And that brings us to the second main thing that we see in this passage.

We need to maintain a God-centered perspective, but we also need to enjoy the ongoing intimacy of God-centered prayer.

Woven throughout this passage are Nehemiah's prayers. In verse 9, Nehemiah prays for strength, and in verse 14, he prays for justice.

[20:12] Notice in that prayer for strength in verse 9 how it just seamlessly flows in the narrative.

This happens a lot in the book of Nehemiah. It's as if to say that prayer is something that's meant to be woven into every corner of our lives.

I mean, think about the situation for Nehemiah here. Nehemiah is at the office, and he's just gotten word of an open letter. That's like an email that's been CC'd to the whole company.

And this sort of open letter contains a not-so-very-veiled threat that if he doesn't come meet with Sambalot, the sort of, you know, director of operations over a few companies over, if he doesn't come meet with Sambalot, he's going to be accused of treason to the king of Persia.

And as Nehemiah is dictating his response, a prayer goes up from his heart, Oh God, strengthen my hands. Friends, do you see the intimacy that God wants you to have with him at any moment to speak with him, and he will hear?

Nehemiah knows that in himself he's weak, so he calls out to God for strength. Give us this day our daily bread. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

[21:44] Oh God, strengthen my hands. You know, we often think of prayer as a work that we have to perform, as a sort of religious duty that we have to engage in, but Nehemiah actually shows us that prayer is really the breath of the heart, giving simple expression to our needs before the God who made us and loves us and who promises to hear us and to fight for us.

So if you are weary and if you are weak and if you are afraid, look to God. Pray for strength.

He will hear and he will answer you. Nehemiah also prays in verse 14 for justice. This God-centered life of prayer involves a prayer for justice.

Now at first, this prayer in verse 14 can sound a little vindictive, but actually, what Nehemiah is doing here in this prayer is actually acknowledging that God is the only just judge.

Rather than seeking vengeance against his enemies, Nehemiah lets God be God. Matthew Henry writes on this verse, he says, whatever injuries are done to us, we must not avenge ourselves, but commit our cause to God who judges righteously.

[23 : 19] You know, rather than thinking that Nehemiah can fix his own problems and put his enemies in their place, he prays for God's justice whenever and however God chooses. You see, just like Nehemiah knows that he's weak and so he must pray for strength, so Nehemiah knows that he's also not righteous, he's not a perfect judge, so he turns his enemies over to God who is.

Do you wonder how Nehemiah is able to put up with the ongoing stress and schemes of his opponents who just won't quit?

How is he able under all that pressure to answer with such clarity and shrewdness? How is he able to deal with the nobles of Judah, for example, in verse 19, who come to him and just praise how wonderful Tobiah is, Tobiah, such a great guy and then turn around and betray Nehemiah's confidence right back to his enemy?

How is it that Nehemiah doesn't just lose his cool? And how can you and I live in the midst of a world that does the exact same thing?

People disappoint us, they betray us, they gossip about us, they intimidate us, they forget about us, they threaten us, and yet, in prayer, we can lay all of that out before a God who is perfect in judgment.

[24 : 54] We don't need to sort it all out. We don't need to be the judge. We don't need to be defensive or bitter or entitled. We can pray, God, let your kingdom come and let your will be done.

Forgive me my trespasses as I forgive those who trespass against me. If you are under pressure, if you feel like you're under attack, pray for God's justice.

Entrust it into his hands, he will hear your prayer, and then you'll have the clarity and the peace and the perspective to act in a way that honors him, that is shrewd, that is courageous, that is persevering.

So when the world wants to make us afraid, afraid to keep going, afraid to hold fast to our allegiance to Christ and his kingdom, Nehemiah 6 reminds us to fill our minds with a God-centered perspective and to express our hearts in ongoing, intimate, God-centered prayer.

And then, what's the outcome? Well, in verse 15, the wall's finished.

[26 : 11] They actually do it, and they do it in 52 days. Friends, it's going to take longer than 52 days to build the thing we're planning to build over there. I guarantee you that, and this was a big project Nehemiah was engaged in.

Talk about an answer to prayer, 52 days. And because Nehemiah, doesn't give in to the fear of the world, the world, ironically, in verse 16, begins to fear God.

And again, we see the missional thrust of this book and of the entire Old Testament and of the entire Bible, that God is out to capture the hearts of all nations, and he's using his people to do it. Their very opponents became fears of God in just a little bit more of a true way because of this work. But surprisingly, that's not the end of the book of Nehemiah.

You would think, right? They build the wall, boom, book over, bring on the New Testament, right? No. Moreover, in those days, all this other stuff started happening.

[27 : 25] The city wall is finished, but the opposition keeps coming in verses 17 through 19, and there's still more work to be done. In chapter 7, Nehemiah then begins the work of protecting the city in verses 1 through 4, and then repopulating the city beginning in verse 5.

There's more to be done, and there's more opposition to withstand. So the story of Nehemiah is not done. It pushes ahead.

And you know, even by the end of this book, it's not over. The temple's finished, the city's rebuilt, the people are gathered, but the king, the long-awaited king, is still not here.

You know, Nehemiah's enemies accuse him of making himself a king, and that's all lies, of course, but the truth is, Nehemiah and the rest of the returned exiles know that there is a real king still on the way.

And you know, friends, our story isn't done either. Even when we stand strong, even when we complete great works for God's kingdom, the opposition's going to keep coming, and there's still going to be work to do, but we know that the king, the king that Nehemiah was waiting for, the king that Isaiah spoke about, and Zechariah and Haggai, the king that they were all talking about, the king has come, and we know that this king is going to come again.

[29 : 01] The world may try to make us afraid, but with our eyes fixed on our once and coming King Jesus, the church will endure.

Friends, you will endure. The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ, her Lord. She is a new creation by water and the word.

From heaven, he came and sought her to be his holy bride. With his own blood, he bought her, and for her life, he died. Mid toil and tribulation and tumult of her war, she waits the consummation of peace forevermore, till with the vision glorious our longing eyes are blessed, and the great church victorious shall be the church at rest.

Let's pray. Father, in this moment, we take just a moment to be still before you and to open up our hearts before you in this quiet to let our souls come out as it were and to lay our fears before you. Oh, Lord Jesus, you are great. Lord, you have loved us. You have died for us. You have risen again. I pray for all of us gathered here that we would stand firm and have all the wisdom and courage we need going out this week into your world as ambassadors of your kingdom, knowing that you've given us a great work.

[31 : 03] Even so, come, Lord Jesus. Amen. Amen. Amen. Would you stand and sing with us?

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. People are having you along with us giving us all these here shown us.

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

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.