

Facing an Impossible Task

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Preacher: Nick Lauer

[0 : 00] Good morning, church. It's good to see you this morning. Our sermon passage today is Nehemiah, chapters 3 and 4. That's page 371 in the Pew Bible.

Let me invite you to turn there with me. Nehemiah, chapters 3 and 4. Now, to set the stage for our text, I want to begin by reading the end of actually Nehemiah, chapter 2, verses 17 through 20.

So let me read verses 17 through 20 of chapter 2 for us, and then I'll pray, and then we'll dive in. So this is Nehemiah speaking to the returned exiles in Jerusalem.

And they said, Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for the good work. But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite's servant and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they jeered at us and despised us and said, What is this thing that you are doing?

Are you rebelling against the king? Then I replied to them, The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build.

[1 : 47] But you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem. Let's pray together. Father, we do ask for your blessing upon this time that we spend in these moments attending to your word.

God, with the psalmists, we cry out that if you remain silent to us, God, we are like those who go down to the grave. Hearing your word spoken, hearing your voice coming to us through your word, God, these are our only hope of life.

So we sit before you this morning, God, hungry to hear your words. God, would you help me as I unpack this passage and preach this word?

Lord, would my human words be swept up into the words of your spirit to faithfully proclaim what is here and what you are saying to your church? We pray all this, Father, in Jesus' name.

Amen. Well, it must have seemed like an impossible task. Build a wall around Jerusalem.

[2 : 52] The year is 445 B.C., 90 years after the first group of Jews returned to the land of Judah after the exile to Babylon. At this point in history, the temple has been rebuilt.

The word of God is being taught, but the city itself is still largely in ruins. And Nehemiah has just arrived in Jerusalem from the Persian imperial capital of Susa, and he's gathered together the people, and he's told them of his plan to restore the dignity of the city and rebuild its walls.

Now, this was a huge task, a huge task. It was roughly 2,300 meters around the city.

That's about the length of 250 football fields. How many football fields would you take up if this was the project before us? We'd each have to take about one.

100 yards, each of us. Build a wall. And what was left of the original wall was nothing but charred remains and rubble, which was utterly unusable for the reconstruction.

[3 : 58] But, you know, it wasn't just a huge task. It was a despised task. The surrounding people, their neighbors, hear about it, and they ridicule them.

They despise them. So how would this small band of returned Jewish exiles be any match on the one hand for the magnitude of such a task?

But not just that. On the other hand, how would they be any match for the opposition to the task? You know, we might ask the same question of ourselves, the church, today.

Of course, now that Christ has come and poured out his spirit at Pentecost, God's people are no longer a physical city amidst the nations of Palestine. Rather, we are a spiritual city amidst the nations of the whole world.

We're not building physical walls anymore. We're building spiritual communities of faith and hope and love. And yet, the task before us to build the church, to advance God's kingdom, is equally daunting, if not more so.

[5 : 05] Just like in Nehemiah's day, there is much work to be done. The magnitude of the task is great. And just like in Nehemiah's day, there's opposition that we need to withstand.

Think about the magnitude of our task. There are about 860,000 people who live in New Haven County, many of whom have never heard the gospel, many of whom have actually had terrible experiences with the church and frankly want nothing to do with Jesus.

Statistics about addiction, poverty, mental health, abuse, are at staggering levels. Not just outside the church, but inside the church.

And rather than being communities of faith and hope and love, churches can often deteriorate into places of cynicism and bitterness and burnout. The task of building up the church and advancing God's kingdom is staggering.

The magnitude of the task before us is great. But think about the opposition to the task as well. Christianity is often ridiculed as sort of an outdated, antiquated thing, isn't it?

[6 : 20] Too old, too prescriptive, too narrow to be of any real use. Besides, some think, haven't we tried it already? What makes us think it's going to work now? What good has it done?

But you know, the opposition isn't just ridicule or unbelief from the world. We also have to contend with our own sinful natures, don't we? Our selfish pride that wants to be made up of, made much of.

Our sinful desires that want to gratify ourselves rather than glorify God. Our self-justifying spirits that would rather fester over a wrong than overlook an offense.

Oftentimes the enemy is ourselves, isn't it? But if that's not opposition enough from the world and from our own sinful natures, there's also the one that Jesus calls the accuser.

A spiritual enemy whose main weapon is the lie. The lie that God is neither good enough nor powerful enough to make any difference.

[7 : 27] The lie that we don't need a Savior. The lie that even if there was a Savior, God couldn't possibly love someone like me and want to save me. And so it's easy, isn't it, to grow discouraged as a church when we see the magnitude of the task, when we see the opposition to the task.

It's easy to get discouraged and it's easy to grow afraid. But what Nehemiah chapters 3 and 4 show us is hope.

God has made a way for us to meet both the magnitude of the task and the opposition to the task. We see the magnitude of the task being faced in chapter 3 and the opposition in chapter 4.

So first, let's think about the magnitude. In chapter 3, to sum it up, we see the magnitude of the church's task is no match for a ministry-minded membership.

The magnitude of the church's task is no match for a ministry-minded membership. Now, at first glance, chapter 3, just looks like a long list of obscure names and places around Jerusalem, right?

[8 : 47] Look down there. You're like, man, I'm glad he's not going to read that whole chapter. And I'd be making up how to pronounce about half of those names. True confessions. But you know, actually, as we take a breath and glance over that chapter, what it is, it's actually a description of the work and the workers who took up the daunting task of rebuilding the walls.

It's quite a heroic and courageous list. The description of the work begins in the north end of the city at what's called the Sheep Gate in verse 1.

And then, we're going to move kind of counterclockwise around the city's perimeter, naming the various gates and landmarks along the way. And the gates of the city become the sort of major landmarks that divide up the work.

From the Sheep Gate in verse 1, you see that there, we go west to the Fish Gate in verse 3, slightly south to the Gate of Yeshna in verse, is it verse 6? Then from there, we take a steep turn south down to the Valley Gate in 13 until we reach the southernmost part of the city, what's called the Dung Gate in verse 14.

Okay, you had to really feel for the guys who were building the Dung Gate, right? Not the most glamorous job, but there you go. They drew the short sticks. They had to build the Dung Gate. But anyway, keep going.

[10 : 12] From there, the wall shoots north again up to the Fountain Gate, the Water Gate, the Horse Gate in verse 28, the East Gate, the Mustard Gate until back to the northernmost part of the city where the work began at the Sheep Gate in verse 32, right near the temple in the northernmost part of the city, probably named the Sheep Gate because that's where the sacrifices were brought into the city for worship at the temple.

And so we see that the people actually tackle the whole project at once, every member of the community finding their place, doing their part, joining in the great work.

And the priests in verse 1, in verse 1, they consecrated, they set it apart, not just the Sheep Gate, but by relationship to the whole task, they consecrated, they set it apart as devoted to the Lord.

Now it's hard not to think here as we see the community taking up this project together. It's hard not to think here of the description of the church in the New Testament, isn't it?

Think of what Paul has to say in Ephesians chapter 4. Speaking of the church, he says, and we heard this earlier, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into Him who is the head into Christ, from whom the whole body joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped.

[11 : 28] When each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. When each part is working properly, the body grows, building itself up in love.

You see, in the body of Christ, our membership means ministry, a call to serve and love and to find your place in this great work of building the spiritual city of God.

Let me make a couple observations from Nehemiah chapter 3 about this every member ministry. First, what we see here is that the workers on the wall come from all the social levels of the community.

If you scan throughout this chapter, you'll come across priests, Levites, temple servants, civic rulers, craftsmen, merchants, men, and women.

No one is excluded from the work. Everyone finds their place. Now, I think there's a two-fold lesson for us there. On the one hand, don't think that there's no place for you in the work of the church and the work of the kingdom.

[12 : 38] You may not think that you have much to contribute, but friend, Jesus made you a part of His body, a part of His city for a reason.

There are no accidents. For the sake of the kingdom, you do have a role to play. In fact, you're a needed member. Remember what Paul says? Only when each part is working properly, each and every part, do we grow the way God intends.

You have a place. We actually need you on the wall, as it were. On the other hand, if some people think they're no good to minister in the church, don't fall into the opposite trap of thinking you're too good.

Notice verse 5. Look at the end of verse 5. And next to them, the Techoites repaired, but their nobles would not stoop to serve their Lord.

The nobles of Techoa, a region I think south of Jerusalem, were a bit too proud to get their hands dirty and build a wall. Friend, don't let that be you.

[13 : 49] Consider rather the example of verse 9. Next to them, Rephiah, the son of Hur, ruler of half the district of Jerusalem repaired. Or verse 12. Next to him, Shalom, the son of Halahesh, ruler of half the district of Jerusalem repaired.

He and his daughters. Who are these two men? They were basically what we might call mayors of half of the city and half of the surrounding district. But they didn't think that the work of rebuilding the wall was too mundane for them.

No, it was an honor to serve God's kingdom in this way. It was a privilege to them. No matter how great their social standing in the world, they were willing to be servants in the church.

another observation about every member ministry that we see here. Consider that many people built the wall even though it wasn't necessarily what we might call their gifting.

In verse 8, who do we see there? There are goldsmiths and perfumers who are working on the construction project. In verse 32, there are merchants.

[15 : 00] In verse 26, there are temple servants. And not one of them seemingly said, sorry, Nehemiah, this isn't really my spiritual gift, you know.

I took a spiritual gift survey when Ezra came into town. It showed that I was something very different, not bricklaying, not masonry, not carrying stuff. So I'm going to sit this one out.

But hey, when we start the perfume ministry, let me know. I'm on it. I'm in there. In the meantime, I'm going to sit this one out. Now, of course, it is okay to want to serve out of your strengths, right?

That's a good principle. But friends, if a perfumer can lay bricks, how much more can you and I take up a ministry that might not necessarily be a perfect match for our skills for the sake of loving Christ's church.

If the real need is there, ministry-mindedness means that we gladly engage in the task wholeheartedly. We take up our place on the wall for the good of the whole and count it a privilege to be a part of beautifying God's city and restoring its dignity.

[16 : 16] And so what's the result of this every-member ministry? Jump down into chapter 4, verse 6. Look at chapter 4, verse 6. It says, And so we built the wall, and all the wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work.

Isn't that awesome? When everyone joined the work, the wall came together, and pretty soon they were halfway done. They started to actually turn the corner. This impossible task suddenly looked pretty possible.

So let me make a very simple application to our life here at Trinity. And this is going to feel really mundane, I know, but let's just go there.

If every member of our church served on a ministry team on Sunday just once or twice a month, friends, we'd almost never have to ask for volunteers. If every member served in some ministry just once or twice a month, we'd have more than enough to do the work before us and more.

Now, I know we don't do a lot of volunteer asking at Trinity, but imagine that. Think of how much encouraging, life-giving energy would be released in our midst if we loved one another in just that simple way to serve in some ministry just once or twice a month around here.

[17 : 36] And as our church grows, imagine how we'd be able to welcome more people, serve more newcomers, allow our body to grow into the full measure of the stature of Christ, as Paul says.

So where's your place on the wall? Do you have one? If you don't know where you should join in, you can talk to me after the service.

I can point you in the right direction. Or you can email the church office through the website. The staff would be more than happy to connect you with the ministry. You can talk to someone who's doing something around here that looks like you might be interested in.

Do that so you can take an active part in the good work that's going on around here. But let me apply this principle to our evangelistic task as well, our call to make disciples and be salt and light in the world.

You know, providentially, providentially, God has placed each one of us in our particular context in our city, in our communities. Whether it's your job or your neighborhood or your campus or your kayaking club, whatever, when you look down through this list in chapter 3, a lot of people start rebuilding the wall right across the street from their house.

[19 : 04] It's no mistake that you are where you are. And in this list from Nehemiah, we see that people are taking up the work right before them.

Look at verse 23. After them, Benjamin and Hashab repaired opposite their house. And after them, Azariah, the son of Maseah, son of Ananiah, repaired beside his own house.

Where do you belong in the work of the kingdom? Right where you are. God's placed you there for a reason. If each of us viewed our lives this way and began praying, God, use me right here.

Open my eyes to how you're going to use me in these relationships, in this workplace, on this street, in this neighborhood, in this residence hall, in this apartment building. Just imagine what could happen.

Yes, the task would still be great, but it would not be impossible. The wall would start to come together.

[20 : 13] People will come to know Christ and the kingdom will advance. How can we be so sure? I'm speaking pretty confidently, aren't I?

Friends, as we heard this morning in Sunday school, it's not because I have a lot of faith in humanity. It's because I have a lot of faith in the Lord. Isn't this the message of Christianity?

That God loved the fallen world so much that he gave his only son to die on a cross for our sins, to rise again on the third day, to ascending glory to the Father, to pour out his Spirit so that he might draw men and women to himself from every tribe, every tongue, every culture, every city so that he might reconcile us to God and one another.

Did Christ die on the cross? Did he rise again? If yes, then our mission cannot fail. And he's inviting all of us to join in the work, to take your place on the wall and see the city come alive again.

But that doesn't mean it's going to be easy. The work gets off to an incredible start in chapter 3. The people say they're going to do it in chapter 2 and then they do it in chapter 3.

[21 : 35] It's wonderful. But soon, opposition comes. Let's pick up the story in chapter 4, verse 1. Let me read chapter 4 for us.

Now, when Sanballat, he's one of the local non-Jewish officials sort of of the neighboring surrounding people. Now, when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged and he jeered at the Jews.

And he said in the presence of his brothers and of the army of Samaria, Samaria is sort of the district just north of Judea and Jerusalem, what are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore it for themselves?

Will they sacrifice? Will they finish up in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish and burned ones at that? Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him and he said, yeah, what they're building, if a fox goes up on it, he'll break down their stone wall.

And then Nehemiah prays, Hear, O God, for we are despised. Turn back their taunt on their own heads and give them up to be blundered in a land where they're captives. Do not cover their guilt and let not their sin be blotted out from your sight, for they've provoked you to anger in the presence of the builders.

[22 : 49] So we built the wall and all the wall was joined together to half its height for the people had a mind to work. But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and that the breaches were beginning to be closed, they were very angry.

And they plotted, they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it. And we prayed to our God and said a guard is a protection against them day and night.

In Judah, it was said, the strength of those who bear the burdens is failing. There's too much rubble. By ourselves, we will not be able to rebuild the wall. And our enemies said, they will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work.

At that time, the Jews who lived near them from all directions came and said to us ten times, you must return to us. So, in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall and open places, I stationed the people by their clans with their swords, their spears, and their bows.

And I looked and arose and said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord who is great and awesome and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes.

[24 : 14] When our enemies heard that it was known to us and that God had frustrated their plan, we all returned to the wall, each to his work. From that day on, half of my servants worked on construction and half held the spears, shields, bows, and coats of mail.

And the leaders stood behind the whole house of Judah who were building the wall. Those who carried burdens were loaded in such a way that each labored on the work with one hand and held his weapon with the other.

And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built. The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me and I said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, the work is great and widely spread and we are separated on the wall far from one another.

In the place where you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there, our God will fight for us. So we labored at the work and half of them held the spears.

From the break of dawn until the stars came out. I also said to the people at that time, let every man and his servant pass the night within Jerusalem that they may be a guard for us by night and may labor by day.

[25 : 22] So neither I nor my brothers nor my servants nor the men of the guard who followed me, none of us took off our clothes, each kept his weapon at his right hand. So what do we see?

By the end of chapter 4, this construction site around Jerusalem has turned into a battleground. Brothers and sisters, let us not think that the task of building the church, of seeing God's kingdom advance, will happen without a fight.

In this chapter, notice how the taunts of verses 1 and 3 become threats in verses 7 and 8. As the work progresses, the opposition doesn't get less and less, it gets more and more.

The higher the wall becomes, the fiercer the opposition grows. In verse 7, in verse 7, the city is now actually sort of surrounded with enemies. Sanballat from Samaria in the north, Arabs in the south, Ammonites in the east, the Ashdodites in the west, they are literally surrounded by their opponents.

And the people get discouraged in verse 10. Seeing the opposition growing, their work songs actually turn into sort of songs of despair.

[26 : 40] What they say in verse 10 actually sort of has a kind of meter to it in the Hebrew. One translator rendered verse 10 this way, the builders are pooped, the rubbish piles up, we're in over our heads, we can't build this wall.

And yet by the end of the chapter, the discouragement and fear of verse 10 has given way to renewed energy and courage to work in verse 21, from the break of dawn until the stars come out.

So what happened? What changed? Well, what we see in Nehemiah 4 is that the opposition to the task is no match for a great and awesome God.

The opposition to our task is no match for a great and awesome God. Verse 14 is the turning point. Nehemiah says, do not be afraid of them.

Remember the Lord who is great and awesome and fight. Now as Paul says in Ephesians 6, today the church is not waging war against flesh and blood.

[27 : 58] This is now a spiritual battle we are in. The people of Nehemiah's day had one hand on the work and one hand on the weapon, the sword and the trowel as Charles Spurgeon so famously put it.

But the armor that we take up today is not the literal steel of a sword. No, today we actually reject that kind of violence for the way of the cross. Rather today what we take up is the spiritual armor of God, the sword of the spirit to fight discouragement, to withstand even physical threats, to overcome our fears.

Paul says it's the belt of truth that we fasten on when the lies come streaming in. and it's a breastplate of righteousness that we put on when the accuser says we're not worthy of God's acceptance in God's people.

And it's the gospel of peace that becomes shoes for our feet when our doubts begin to trip us up. And it's the shield of faith and it's a helmet of salvation that allows us to withstand, yes, even threats of violence that may come our way.

And it's the word of God that is the sword, the sword of the spirit. That word, as Hebrew says, that is sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart, engaging even our enemies with the grace of the gospel.

[29 : 21] Now, I know this battle, this warfare language can sometimes make us uncomfortable. I get it. But friends, we are in a spiritual fight. The church is a liberation movement behind our great liberator, Jesus.

And he has stationed us behind enemy lines to get about the work of setting captives free. Free from sin and guilt and shame and condemnation and dread and addiction and self-pity and pride and fear.

But these enemies don't go down without a fight, friends. The work of the kingdom means one hand on the shovel and one hand on the sword. Are you taking up the resources for this fight in the word of God and in the gospel?

But notice, Nehemiah doesn't just tell the people to fight. They have their responsibility to take up their defenses, yes. But underneath and around and over their human responsibility to fight is the sovereignty of God who fights for us.

Remember the Lord who is great and awesome. At the head of the church then and now is a great and awesome God.

[30 : 48] But friends, don't you see how God has revealed himself even further in the gospel? that we have a captain who took the field on our behalf and who strode into battle against our greatest foe sin and death and hell and who triumphed not with the sword but with a cross by laying down his own life so that you and I might live.

Do you remember when Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane praying and the soldiers came for him and for his disciples and he said, who are you seeking? And they said, Jesus of Nazareth and what did Jesus do?

Did he shrink back? Did he sort of lose himself in the crowd of disciples? No, just the opposite. He steps forward to meet them putting himself in between their enemies and his people and says, I'm the one you're looking for.

Let them go free. Don't you see, friends, in our place Jesus meets his accusers and ours so that we can go free. In our place Jesus bears our sin and guilt so that we can go free.

That's how the battle's been won. So that whatever the world throws at us, so whatever the evil one threatens us with, they're no match for our great and awesome God, the Lord Jesus Christ.

[32 : 08] Friends, have you come to trust in this captain of souls, this loving Lord who will always protect you and never lead you astray? If so, then do not fear.

Do not fear the magnitude of our task. It is great, but he's made us one body in himself, every member a minister to complete the work before us and do not fear the opposition to the task.

It will be fierce at times. Do not be surprised. It may grow as the work continues, but remember the Lord who is great and awesome. He has already won the battle and we can stand strong in the Lord Jesus and in the strength of his might to withstand whatever may come.

It may seem like an impossible task before us, church, but what is impossible for us is much more than possible with God. And so, brothers and sisters, to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Jesus Christ throughout all generations forever and ever.

Amen. Let's pray. Amen. Father, we pray that you would send out your spirit upon us now.

[33 : 36] Cause the seed of your word to take deep root in the soil of our hearts. God, we know that as soon as we step out those doors, there's going to be birds that want to snatch this seed away.

There are going to be cares and concerns that want to choke it out. There's going to be rocky soil that wants it to just stay shallow, but God, would you do a sovereign work and bury this word deep in our hearts and change us from the inside out.

Clothe us with your gospel, we pray, Lord Jesus, as we go out into the world today. Lord, help us not to fear or grow discouraged when the task seems big and the opposition seems great.

Help us to keep our eyes on you, Lord Jesus, the captain of our souls. You will hold us fast. You will allow us to rise up and do the work that you've called us to do.

Oh God, help us to keep in step with your spirit as we do so. In Jesus' name we pray, Father. Amen. Well, friends, in response, let's stand and we're going to sing a song, Oh Church Arise, which is about taking up the armor of God for this spiritual calling that he's given us as a church.

[34 : 50] So let's sing this song together. Amen.