

Welcome and prayer—not reading the whole passage first

Let's jump straight in, and review where we've come so far in Nehemiah:

Chapter 1, began with, **"I said, "O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, ⁶ let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you".** --This really is all of our cries, individually and together, even today. It's what we need, require, and crave, even when we don't know it. Just like Nehemiah, we must call out to God in humble repentance in order for Him to save us, and redeem us. We have sinned, and continue to sin against Him. That is the cause of the mess that our society is in.

In chapter 2 Nehemiah continued in saying, **"I replied to them, "The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build, but you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem."** --God's people need to trust Him that His view of "prosperity" and success is the one that we should pursue, which is growth of heart, not wallet or material possessions. Also, when we are doing his work, we'll face opposition, but should remember that the enemies of God, despite apparent superiority, have zero claim to position or power in God's Kingdom, as represented by Jerusalem. They have already lost the battle, and don't even know it. We should be stout of heart, and not discouraged.

As we saw last week, Chapter 3 is more difficult to find an easy "sound bite", but **"the high priest rose up with his brothers the priests, and they built the Sheep Gate. They consecrated it and set its doors"**. --God calls certain people to lead the charge, and then connect with others to do the work. God's work is also sacred, and requires people being set aside, or consecrated. Different people in God's community have different jobs and roles, also. Each one plays a part, and especially today, as the church is sort of reinventing itself, we need all hands-on deck. There is much work to be done to reclaim the space, and rebuild the rubble of our individual and collective lives.

We also need to be aware that we are certainly not the first group of believers to face some sort of opposition—it might feel like Covid is preventing us from being the church, but that is actually a very narrow view of the Christian life. The big picture of Nehemiah is that there always has been, and likely always will be people that the enemy uses to try to stop God's work. As long as you live with one foot in the world, living according to the world's values and for the world's goals, Satan won't trouble you. You can go to church and even pray and read your Bible, and he won't mind. But the minute you wake up from your spiritual lethargy, shake off the worldly mindset, and commit yourself to radical obedience to Jesus Christ, you will encounter spiritual opposition, just like Nehemiah and the Jews did. In 2020, 260,000,000 Christians live in some 50 countries that have 'extreme' levels of persecution., and it's getting worse. That's 1 in 8 Christians worldwide that face imminent attack or death for their beliefs. Their walls have been torn down, and continue to be torn down. However, and this is eternally important, in Matthew 16, Jesus Himself said, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock (which is people, not places) I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it".

Here are a few examples of some other well-known people that also encountered opposition as they attempted to rebuild some walls. In the late 1800s and then the 20th Century, **Ida Scudder** followed her missionary father to India and tried to help the poorest of the poor, and women in a land where Hindu beliefs regarding the value of women were contrary to the gospel. **Betty Greene** became a pilot during WW2 and then used her flying skills to help share Jesus with people in places like Mexico, Nigeria, and Indonesia. This was at a time where female pilots were of course, extremely rare. **Amy Carmichael** was another young woman that went to India in the early 20th Century to share the gospel under very difficult circumstances. Going back a century to the 1800s, **George Mueller** envisioned and then created an incredible system of orphanages, and schools in Industrial England, well before anyone even considered something like the welfare state. For months and years, he relied on God for literally just their daily bread.

Florence Young, in the early 20th Century left New Zealand and embarked on an incredibly difficult series of missional works in the islands of the South Pacific; at times they were literally afraid for their lives due to murdering tribes. **Lillian Trasher** was an American in the 20th Century who left her home and travelled to Egypt to look after orphans in a place where food and shelter were constantly at risk. **Gladys Aylward** had no formal training, yet was called to go to the far reaches of northern China in the 20th Century, at a time when there was open hostility towards Christians, and women, in that society. She had even failed out of Bible

school! Finally, **Louis Zamperini** was an American athlete that first ran in the 1936 Berlin Olympics with Jesse Owens, then became a POW in the Pacific theatre in WW2, and was tortured mercilessly for years by a Japanese officer he nicknamed “the Bird”; a man that Zamperini later met and forgave.

The common thread for all of these people, and 1000s more, is that like Nehemiah, they were called to places they had never actually been, to do things they were not usually qualified to do, under the threat of violence and hostility from people that hated what God stands for. We should not be surprised that society is opposed to God’s people because that has always been the case! In Acts 12, for example, “...Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church”. We should expect no less.

Let’s get in to Chapter 4:

4 Now **“when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews”**. --Recall that Sanballat was the governor of Samaria, a place known to despise God’s people. As soon as they took action for God, he attacked with a barrage of words and ridicule but no facts. This is a pretty common method of our enemy. We need to stop being offended when society opposes us, as it is expected. Matthew 5:11 states, “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account”.

² **“And he said in the presence of his brothers and of the army of Samaria, “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?”** -- Sanballat uses techniques typical of a demagogue here. He paraded out his army. He enlisted a visitor named Tobiah. He also used a series of unanswerable rhetorical questions to stir up contempt against the Jews. Often our enemies will do the same things—attack in numbers and get us tongue tied with a bunch of questions—these are all tools of the devil. We should not “cast our pearls before swine”. Psalm 120:2 says “Deliver me, O LORD, from lying lips, from a deceitful tongue”.

³ **“Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, “Yes, what they are building—if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall!”** Even the visitor Tobiah jumps in on the mockery with his facetious question about the strength of the wall. We are tempted to defend and fight, but as many of us learned, when we read *The Bait of Satan* a few years ago, we must not take the bait. So often we think, and often with good intentions, that we can argue logic with people opposed to God’s work, but it simply does not work that way. We require the HS to act and intervene before even the basics make sense to people. Nehemiah’s prayerful response is perfect.

⁴ **“Hear, O our God, for we are despised. Turn back their taunt on their own heads and give them up to be plundered in a land where they are captives. ⁵ Do not cover their guilt, and let not their sin be blotted out from your sight, for they have provoked you to anger in the presence of the builders”.** --He cries out to God in hopeful anguish, for them being despised by the local rulers. He also does not play nice with them, but rather pleads for the Lord to give up their enemies to be plundered, and then exposed before the Lord himself. He realizes that God Himself sees the opposition to what is ultimately work for him, and Nehemiah fully sees the importance of what they are doing. He does not lobby City Hall, or start a committee, or try to bargain—he asks God to deal with them. We can always do that also, but usually we try to do things ourselves. Our first response should be prayer and scripture; not social media posts. Guilty as charged.

⁶ **“So we built the wall. And all the wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work”.** --The sturdy simplicity of that statement makes Sanballat and his friends suddenly appear small and shrill, dwarfed by the faith, unity and energy of the “weaker” Jews. The builders’ method is interesting here also, as they give priority to joining the wall and closing the ring at a low level, rather than completing in sections at full height. They knew that they needed to get that wall around the city quickly. Their “mind to work” reveals their motivation; it’s for God. Period. As we heard last week, the wall was about 4 km in length, and 25 feet high, so even at “only” half height, it’s still massive.

7 “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. ⁸ And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it”. --It appears that Nehemiah and his people are basically surrounded on three sides (east, west and south) by the opposing forces. Their help promised by Artaxerxes lies 1700 km away, a journey of 55 days. They are very much on their own—except for the Lord of course! -- Sanballat and the others are angry, likely because the Jews are not playing by their rules. There is very little arguing going on. In our time today, we gain little by arguing with those opposed to us. How many of you (Including me) have actually argued someone into the Kingdom? And if you did, “argue them in”, did it actually last? I remember Pastor Leland telling me that “what a person is saved with, is what they’ll be saved to”. If you logically argue someone into faith, it likely has not been accompanied by contrite repentance. In other words, it’s not what we’re against that draws people, and opposition, but what we’re for. For example, I know that in today’s society people outside the church get outraged that some Christian schools actually teach what the Bible says. We do not win them over by arguing. In fact, that is one of the devil’s favourite tactics, as he “was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). Additionally, too, though, the protection offered by Artaxerxes actually helps as there is no physical attack.

9 “And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night”.-- Nehemiah continues with prayer—he is not stupid though, either, as he sets a guard around the clock. We too, need to be on guard all of the time. It’s easy to be a Christian on Sunday mornings from 10:30-noon. What about the other 166.5 hours per week, though?

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.” --The task is large and daunting. The people are afraid of being attacked. Even their friends and families in verse 12 will plead with them to abandon the project. Likely many of us have felt that the task of rebuilding the walls out of our rubble is an impossible task. Perhaps we feel that our sin is too great for God to redeem. It is pretty ridiculous to make such an idol of out of our sin, and life’s wreckage, that we think it’s too big for God somehow. Any God that could be deterred by ourselves is not very big to begin with, is He? It’s a sign of strength to submit to Him and live in an obedient fashion in an almost minute to minute way. As soon as we think we have it dialed in, we’re sunk.

11 “**And our enemies said, “They will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work.”** --The opposition forces appear to decide against outright warlike attack, and instead settle upon a more subtle assault from within. You can almost imagine them trying to infiltrate the ranks of the Jews and whisper discouraging things to them as they’re working. Some commentators see the word “kill” here as “killing their spirit” which in many ways is worse than frontal attack. Doubt and second guessing are often more difficult to deal with than a punch in the face. We are often our own worst enemies in this regard. Grumbling and murmuring within the body is terribly divisive, and spirit killing. Many of us have also been discouraged and side-tracked by all of the Covid regulations. Instead, we need to focus on what we can do, as a church, and individuals. Before Christmas, many of you received a \$2.00 candy bag, and were so happy that someone thought of you. Wow. Such a simple thing, that our enemies can do nothing about. Let’s continue to be Christ-followers that focus on what we can do to lift people up in these trying times.

12 “**At that time the Jews who lived near them came from all directions and said to us ten times, “You must return to us.”** A truly interesting idea here is that as mentioned a moment ago, fellow Jews themselves even began to doubt the work of rebuilding the wall. Far too many people that think of themselves as Christians, bail as soon as it’s time to clean the toilet, or stack chairs, or move somebody, or fix the roof, or cook meals, or make disciplinary decisions, or write bylaws, or submit to a leadership decision, or give sacrificially, or befriend an unlikable or rough person...the list goes on, and truthfully, “the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many and the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few (Matthew 7:13-14). The body of the church is often our own worst enemy and we need to be on guard for people breaking ranks. **Story of Centre Street Bus mtg?**

13 “**So in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, in open places, I stationed the people by their clans, with their swords, their spears, and their bows”.** --It seems here that they recognized their vulnerability, halted the building for a time, and set up the people in an organized fashion to stand guard. They were ready to fight when appropriate, knowing that they needed to defend their right to make progress. It’s important to see that they are rebuilding to claim the city for God, not to return to some type of glory days of the land. They are building to move forward; not to maintain or coast. The church should always be focused on the road ahead, not the one behind. Our transition time should be focused on the future of Arrowsmith—as Pastor Roger has urged us to consider, where are we in 10 years?

¹⁴ **“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.”** --Action returns as Nehemiah addresses the hierarchy in their society. God comes first, but he also sees that earthly connections matter, too. We cannot forget that it is, after all, God’s people that will live inside the wall. These are real people that they are reclaiming territory for also. It’s not a political fight, but a personal one. Every day we must do as he says; do not be afraid and remember the Lord. This is a daily reminder that we all desperately need, to be honest. Nehemiah is very personal in his exhortation. Another noteworthy idea here is that the “fight” is not an attack against the oppressors. Rather, it’s for their friends and family. Very different focus.

The Work Resumes

¹⁵ **“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”.** --Sanballat and the rest could see and hear what the Jews were doing, and stood for, without even being told directly, really. My good friend Tim Hopkins often says he’d rather “see a sermon lived, than hear one preached”, and that seems to be a timeless idea. Their enemies have been frustrated by God Himself, as he strengthened and emboldened the Jews. They did not need to make some kind of big public spectacle to make themselves heard. They stood for what they believed in, and what God desired. Today, especially, the world is so broken and hurting, and at the same time either against the gospel, or simply uninformed, that their “buy in” is us; not any sorts of traditions or expectations. For example, I am amazed at how many students of mine have had zero exposure to Biblical things—even basic things like Noah’s Ark, or the Lord’s Prayer. Don’t assume that anyone knows anything. This can be a tremendous advantage because in some ways there is zero “churchy” clutter to plow through. Just keep working. It’s God’s Kingdom, and he will do the heavy lifting in peoples’ hearts. We just need to be his hands.

¹⁶ **“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**
¹⁷**who were building on 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”.** --Abraham Lincoln said that if he had to chop wood for eight hours, he’d spend two hours sharpening his axe. We need to work smart, not just hard. In the type of construction they were involved in, people needed two hands. So, some of them built the wall, and others stood guard. In our times today, we have various roles in the church. Each part of the body is called to different

things. From preaching on Sunday mornings to cleaning the toilet on Wednesday, every person is essential. Not everyone is called to the same things, but all of them are important.

¹⁸ **“And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built. The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ In the place where you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us.”**--In these days of Covid and physical separation, communication has become increasingly important for many reasons. The trumpeter on the wall is like our email, Zoom and livestream YouTube connection today. We also have an Arrowsmith Connections page on Facebook that is already yielding results. We have prayer walls, and buttons on our web page. Pastor Roger’s update and 4H videos have been connecting people in new ways. I’ve heard that right now the church is not shut down, but deployed. We still have lots of ways to be connected and share the good news, despite being in the process of rebuilding and transition. God will fight for us. Amazing idea, isn’t it? As Ephesians 6 tells us we must “Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. ¹² 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. ¹³ Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm”. Nehemiah’s people did not stop, and neither should we.

²¹ **“So we labored at the work, and half of them held the spears from the break of dawn until the stars came out”.** --Psalm 127 states that “unless the Lord builds...unless the Lord watches over the city...it is in vain”. We can only do what we can do. They kept going, from dawn until dusk. They either were not tired, or simply did not talk about it. Yes, Covid fatigue or transitional work is a real thing, but we cannot let it stop us. After all, God is fighting for us. The Jews were braced by the threats and opposition. It made them stronger, not despondent. If a fighter pilot is taking fire, that is a good thing since it means they are over the target—but they don’t stop—they keep going with the goal in mind. We must remember that the goal is God himself, and the souls of those around us that are perishing—and there’s lots of those all around us.

²² “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.”** --Nehemiah has turned into the kind of leader that was called back in chapter 1. He wept and mourned and prayed for 4 months for this moment. The wall must be finished. Hebrews 12:2 tells us to

“{lay} aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God”. We have to just keep going.

²³ “**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**”.--They simply never let up. They knew the critical nature of their work and just kept pushing ahead. I don’t see any place here where they step back and admire their handiwork, either. The fight is God’s and they are just the labourers. They also expected the battle to continue, and that they needed to stay active. There was no mention of when they would stop. We need to have the same attitude. It’s eternally important.

In the 1800s, **Hudson Taylor** had the somewhat crazy notion that God was calling him to evangelize in China, a place that was known for killing any sort of religious outsiders. China Inland Mission was the result, and the cost for him was immense. His first spouse and several children died in the deplorable conditions, but he kept God’s fight alive there. **CS Lewis** was an intellectual in 20th Century England. He was also an atheist who went through a remarkable born-again experience as he attempted to find the loophole in the Bible. He first fought himself and then his colleagues in his efforts to rebuild the walls of his heart, and show others how to do the same through his incredible writing. In WW2 **Dietrich Bonhoeffer** was famously martyred by the evil Nazi regime because he dared to believe, and share the gospel to rebuild the walls of peoples’ souls in the midst of horrendous tyranny. Lastly, **Corrie Ten Boom** also endured the Nazi regime in WW2. She knew that anyone that did not call on God’s name was doomed. She survived atrocities, and spread the gospel to reclaim God’s territory. Let us all be inspired and strengthened by all of the incredible stories of God reclaiming the cross shaped holes in our hearts.

Pray