

The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

Lesson 9: Opposition, Hardship, and Perseverance -- Nehemiah 4:1-6:19

Picture the wall. Picture it half-built, ragged in places, the stones still chalky with mortar dust, and a hundred families bent over it from one end of Jerusalem to the other. The gaps are closing. You can almost feel the city becoming a city again. And then, from across the valley, you hear the laughter. Sanballat is putting on a show for his army and his important friends, and the punchline is you. Are these feeble Jews restoring their wall? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, seeing they are burned? Tobiah leans in with his own joke: even a fox climbing up would break that flimsy thing down. It is an old, cruel tactic, and it still works. Mockery is cheaper than a sword and sometimes it cuts deeper, because a sword threatens your body while a sneer goes after your heart. It whispers that the work is silly, that you are silly for trying, that you should quietly put the trowel down and go home.

What Nehemiah does next is the spine of these three chapters, and it is worth memorizing the way a soldier memorizes his drill. He prays. And he posts a guard. He does not pray instead of working, and he does not work as if prayer were a formality before the real labor begins. He does both, at the same time, with his whole weight behind each. We prayed to our God, and set a watch against them day and night. Half the men build; half the men stand ready with spear and shield. The builders work with one hand and hold a weapon in the other. This is not nervous double-mindedness. This is mature faith. It trusts God completely and watches the gates completely, and it sees no contradiction between the two, because the same God who answers prayer also gave us hands and eyes and the good sense to use them.

Then the threat changes shape. The first half of chapter 5 has nothing to do with Sanballat at all. The danger has come inside the walls. While the enemy mocks from the valley, the wealthy among God's own people are quietly devouring the poor: mortgaging fields, lending grain at interest, and watching neighbors sell their own sons and daughters into slavery just to eat. Nehemiah is angrier here than he was at any pagan general, and rightly so, because a city can survive an enemy outside its gate far longer than it can survive injustice at its own table. So he confronts the nobles, he makes them swear to give it all back, and he sets a personal example that costs him real money, refusing the governor's food allowance, feeding a hundred and fifty at his own expense, because he feared God. Integrity is not just what you say to the enemy. It is what you do to the weakest person you have power over.

The last assault is the most personal of all. They cannot break the wall, so they try to break the man. Four times they invite him down to the plain of Ono for a friendly little meeting, and four times he sends back the same line, a line you should write on the inside of your eyelids: I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down. They float a slanderous open letter to frighten him with rumors of rebellion. They hire a prophet named Shemaiah to lure him into the temple where only priests may go, hoping he will save his skin and ruin his witness in one cowardly

move. Nehemiah sees through every one of them. And then, on the twenty-fifth day of Elul, in fifty-two days, the wall is finished. Even the enemies are unnerved, because they perceive that this work was done by our God. This lesson is about the kind of faith that finishes: a faith that trusts and works, that watches and prays, that loves justice and refuses to come down, all the way to Christ, who endured the cross and said, It is finished.

Group Discussion: When opposition comes against something good you are trying to do for God, which way do you naturally lean: toward frantic activity as if it all depends on you, or toward a passive waiting as if your effort does not matter? Nehemiah refused both, praying to God and setting a watch in the same breath. As a group, talk through what it looks like in practice to trust God fully and work and watch fully at the same time, without slipping into either self-reliance or fatalism.

Personal Reflection: Nehemiah was angrier at the injustice inside the walls than at the enemies outside them, because God's people were quietly exploiting the weakest among them. Sit honestly with this question: is there anyone over whom you have some advantage, a debtor, an employee, a family member, a customer, whom you are treating in a way you would be ashamed to defend before God? What would it cost you, this week, to make it right the way Nehemiah did?

Read Nehemiah 4:1–6:19

Study Questions

1. When Sanballat and Tobiah mocked the builders, Nehemiah's first recorded response was to pray, and his second was to set a guard (Nehemiah 4:4–9). What does this pairing teach us about the relationship between trusting God and taking responsible action, and why is leaning entirely to one side or the other a distortion of biblical faith (Psalm 127:1; Philippians 2:12–13)?
2. Mockery was the enemy's opening weapon, and it is often the first thing that comes against us when we attempt something good for God. When has ridicule, or the fear of it, tempted you to put down the work God gave you? How did you respond, and how do you wish you had?

3. Nehemiah armed the builders so that everyone worked with one hand and held a weapon with the other, and half the people stood guard while half labored (Nehemiah 4:16–18). What does this picture teach about spiritual vigilance and readiness in the Christian life, and how does it correct the idea that genuine faith means we never have to watch, prepare, or defend (1 Peter 5:8; Ephesians 6:11–13)?
4. Nehemiah told the people, Remember the Lord, who is great and terrible, and fight for your brethren, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses (Nehemiah 4:14). What people has God given you to fight for, and what would it look like this week to stand watch over them in prayer and in action rather than in worry?
5. The crisis in chapter 5 came not from the enemy outside but from God's own people exploiting the poor among them through usury and debt-slavery, and Nehemiah was deeply angry (Nehemiah 5:1–13). Why is injustice within the community of God's people such a serious matter to God, and how does this passage shape the way the Lord's people are to treat the weak and the vulnerable among them (James 5:1–6; Luke 6:31; Galatians 6:10)?
6. Nehemiah refused the food allowance he was entitled to as governor, fed many at his own table, and did not lord his authority over the people, because he feared God (Nehemiah 5:14–19). Where do you currently hold some authority or advantage, and is your use of it marked by that same self-giving restraint, or by quietly taking everything you are entitled to take?
7. Four times the enemies tried to lure Nehemiah down to the plain of Ono, and each time he answered, I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down (Nehemiah 6:1–4). How do we discern the difference between a legitimate call to step aside and a temptation to be

drawn off the work God has given us, and what does Nehemiah's single-minded answer teach about guarding our priorities (Luke 9:62; Hebrews 12:1-2)?

8. The enemy tried to make Nehemiah afraid, hoping fear would make him sin and so give them something to slander (Nehemiah 6:9, 13). When has fear pressured you toward a compromise you would not otherwise have made? What truth about God do you most need to remember the next time fear comes knocking?

9. Nehemiah saw through the hired prophet Shemaiah and refused to flee into the temple to save his own life, and in fifty-two days the wall was finished, so that the enemies were cast down in their own eyes, for they perceived that this work was done by our God (Nehemiah 6:10-16). How does this passage hold together God's enabling power and the persevering faith of His servant, so that the finished work testifies to God rather than to the man? How does this kind of faith that finishes the work God assigns point us to Christ, who set His face like flint, endured the cross, and declared, It is finished, and who now reigns and enables His people to persevere and finish the work He gives them (John 17:4; John 19:30; Hebrews 12:1-3; Philippians 1:6; 2 Timothy 4:7)?

10. Across these chapters Nehemiah trusted God, watched the gate, defended the weak, refused the bribe, and finished the work, and through it all Christ is at work shaping His people into that same image. Name one specific way the Lord has been forming you through this lesson, into a person who both trusts and labors, who loves justice, and who refuses to come down from the work He has given you to do.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Psalm 127:1–2, the laborers build in vain unless the Lord builds, faith that works without anxious self-reliance; Ephesians 6:10–18, the whole armor of God for standing firm against the enemy's schemes; James 5:1–6, God's warning to the rich who oppress the laboring poor; Luke 9:51–62, Jesus setting His face toward Jerusalem and the call to keep our hand to the plow; Philippians 1:6, the confidence that He who began a good work will finish it

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