

Nehemiah: The Work Before Us

I CANNOT COME DOWN

Nehemiah 6:1–19

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever noticed that sometimes the hardest part of getting something done isn't the work itself? It's everything that keeps interrupting the work.

You sit down to accomplish something important, and your phone rings. An email comes in. Somebody needs something. Another opportunity presents itself. Something else demands your attention. And before long, you've spent the entire day responding to everything around you without accomplishing the thing you actually needed to do.

Sometimes those interruptions are important. Sometimes they're people who genuinely need our attention. But sometimes they're simply distractions. And one of the great challenges of life is learning to recognize the difference.

We've been watching Nehemiah rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. He's faced obstacles from the beginning. There have been political challenges, ridicule, threats, exhausted workers, and even injustice within the community itself. But through it all, the work has continued.

And when we arrive at chapter 6, something important has happened. The wall has been rebuilt, and there are no gaps remaining, although the doors have not yet been installed in the gates. They're almost finished!

And apparently, Sanballat and his friends realize something. Their opposition hasn't worked. The people haven't quit. The wall is nearly complete. So, they decided to change their approach.

Instead of trying to stop everybody working on the wall, they decide to go after the man leading the work. And what follows is a fascinating series of attempts to distract, discredit, and intimidate Nehemiah.

But through it all, Nehemiah understands something we desperately need to understand.

Not every invitation deserves your attention, and not every opportunity deserves your participation.

1. NOT EVERY OPPORTUNITY DESERVES YOUR PARTICIPATION

Nehemiah 6:1–4

Look at verse 2. Sanballat and Geshem send Nehemiah a message. "Come, let's meet together in the villages of the Ono Valley." Now, on the surface, that sounds rather reasonable. *Let's get together. Let's talk. Maybe we can work through our differences.* And in plenty of circumstances, that's exactly what we ought to do. But Nehemiah knows something about these men.

They've been opposing the work from the beginning. They've mocked the builders. They've threatened violence. They've tried to discourage the people. And the end of verse 2 tells us Nehemiah understood their intentions. "They were planning to harm me."

So, Nehemiah sends a message back. And I love his response in verse 3. **"I am doing important work and cannot come down."**

He doesn't send a lengthy explanation. He doesn't negotiate a more convenient time. He doesn't spend the afternoon defending his decision. He simply says, *I'm doing important work. I cannot come down.*

And verse 4 tells us they sent the same message four times. Four times! And four times Nehemiah gave them the same answer. There's something remarkable about that kind of clarity.

Nehemiah understands what God has entrusted to him, and he refuses to let someone else's agenda pull him away from it. Now, we need to be careful here.

Sanballat's invitation was malicious. Nehemiah knew they intended to harm him. But the principle reaches beyond invitations that are obviously dangerous. Because sometimes the things that distract us from what God has called us to do aren't necessarily bad things. Sometimes they're perfectly good things.

Paul gives us an important principle in 1 Corinthians 10:23. "Everything is permissible," but not everything is beneficial. "Everything is permissible," but not everything builds up. Paul is talking about Christian freedom and the responsibility to use that freedom wisely.

And his point is that something being permissible doesn't automatically make it beneficial. We need to learn to ask more than one question. Not simply, "Is there anything wrong with this?" But also, **"Is this beneficial? Does this build up? Does this help me remain faithful to what God has already entrusted to me?"**

Because you can say yes to something good and still neglect something more important. And I think this is especially significant for Christian families today. We live in a culture that will gladly fill every available moment of our lives.

There's always another activity. Another invitation. Another opportunity. Another commitment. And many of them are good things! But have you noticed that almost everything we sign up for eventually wants more time than we originally agreed to give it?

One practice becomes three. One meeting becomes a committee. One activity becomes a year-round commitment. And before long, we find ourselves sacrificing things that we would have told you were among the most important things in our lives.

We have to sacrifice time with our spouses. Time with our children. Time with our church family. Gathering for worship. Prayer. Rest. Simply being together. And sometimes we don't even realize what's happening because nothing we've said yes to is necessarily sinful.

But a calendar filled with good things can still leave very little room for the things that matter most.

We can become so concerned about giving our children every opportunity that we neglect giving them something they desperately need: our presence.

We can become so busy providing for our families that we have little time left to enjoy them.

We can become so committed to activities that gathering with God's people becomes something we squeeze in when the calendar allows.

And we can become so accustomed to constant activity that rest begins to feel like wasted time.

But God didn't design us for endless activity. He calls us into relationships. He calls us to worship with His people. He gives us rhythms of work and rest. He calls us to be faithful in the responsibilities He's already entrusted to us. And sometimes protecting those things requires a word we've become uncomfortable saying.

No. Not because the opportunity is sinful. Not because the invitation is unreasonable. But because something else matters more. And here's something we often forget. **Every yes is also a no to something else.**

Each time I say yes to something, I am saying no to something else. Every additional commitment requires time and attention that cannot be spent somewhere else. So maybe the question isn't simply whether we have time to do something. Maybe the question is whether we ought to give it the time that belongs to something more important.

Our calendars can reveal priorities that our mouths would never admit. Now, I understand that there are seasons of life when our schedules are shaped by responsibilities we cannot avoid. Work, caregiving, illness, and other obligations can place enormous demands on us.

This isn't about making exhausted people feel guilty for being exhausted. It's about examining the commitments we actually have the freedom to choose. And asking whether our choices reflect what we say matters most.

Because faithfulness isn't measured by how many demands we satisfy. It's measured by how faithfully we obey God. And there's a distinction between Nehemiah 5 and Nehemiah 6 that I don't want us to miss.

Last week, when Nehemiah heard the cries of people who were being mistreated, he stopped and listened. He confronted the wrongdoing. He required restitution. He cared for the people.

But when Sanballat invited him away from the wall, he refused.

Why? Because **Nehemiah wasn't unwilling to be interrupted. He was unwilling to be diverted.**

Faithfulness requires knowing when to stop and listen, and when to keep building. And sometimes the most faithful thing we can say is, **"I am doing important work and cannot come down."**

But Sanballat isn't finished. When Nehemiah refuses to abandon the work for a meeting, his enemies try something else. If they cannot distract him, perhaps they can discredit him. And that's where the next section becomes especially relevant.

2. NOT EVERY ACCUSATION DESERVES YOUR DEFENSE

Nehemiah 6:5–9

Verse 5 tells us that Sanballat sends a fifth message. But this time, it's different. He sends his servant with an open letter. And that detail matters.

A sealed letter would ordinarily be intended for the recipient. An open letter could be read by others. The accusation is being circulated rather than communicated privately.

Sanballat claims that rumors are spreading among the nations that Nehemiah and the Jews intend to rebel against Persia. He even claims that Nehemiah wants to become king.

And then comes the threat: these accusations will reach the Persian king. Think about what Sanballat is doing. Nehemiah has been rebuilding Jerusalem with the authorization of the Persian king.

Now Sanballat is suggesting that the entire project is actually a rebellion against that same king. It's an accusation designed to undermine Nehemiah's credibility and potentially place his life in danger. And then Sanballat says, essentially, *We should get together and talk about this.*

Do you see what's happening? The invitation hasn't changed. But now there's a threat attached to it. *Come meet with me, or your reputation—and perhaps your life—could be in danger.*

And look at Nehemiah's response in verse 8.

"Nothing you are saying has happened. You are inventing them in your own mind." That's it. He denies the accusation. He tells the truth. And he doesn't allow Sanballat to drag him into an endless argument.

Now, that doesn't mean we should never defend ourselves. There are times when accusations require a careful response. There are times when accountability is necessary. There are times when the truth must be established, particularly when others could be harmed.

But there's a difference between responding responsibly to a legitimate concern and allowing every accusation to consume our attention.

Some people will misunderstand you. Some will disagree with you. Some may even misrepresent you. And if you make it your mission to correct every misunderstanding and answer every criticism, you may find that you have very little time left for the work God has entrusted to you.

Nehemiah refuses to let Sanballat determine his priorities. And notice verse 9. Nehemiah recognizes what they're trying to accomplish. "They were all trying to intimidate us, saying, 'They will drop their hands from the work, and it will never be finished.'"

Their goal wasn't simply to damage Nehemiah's reputation. Their goal was to stop the work. And Nehemiah responds with a short prayer. **"But now, my God, strengthen my hands."** That is a biblical response to unjust criticism. That is a biblical way to handle people who baselessly accuse you of things simply to try to get their way.

Nehemiah doesn't pray, "Lord, make everybody like me." He doesn't pray, "Lord, make sure nobody ever says anything untrue about me." He asks God to strengthen his hands so he can remain faithful. Sometimes that's exactly the prayer we need.

Lord, help me tell the truth. Help me receive correction when it's deserved. Help me respond wisely when a response is necessary. And help me not become so consumed with defending myself that I neglect what You've called me to do.

TRANSITION

But the opposition still isn't finished. They've tried distraction. They've tried accusation. And now they move to something even more dangerous. They try to use Nehemiah's fear against him.

3. NOT EVERY FEAR DESERVES YOUR OBEDIENCE

Nehemiah 6:10–19

Beginning in verse 10, Nehemiah visits a man named Shemaiah. Shemaiah tells him that people are coming to kill him and urges him to hide inside the temple.

Now, at first glance, that might sound like a reasonable precaution. If someone is trying to kill you, finding safety seems like a sensible thing to do. And Nehemiah certainly isn't opposed to taking precautions. We've already watched him post guards and arm the workers.

But something is wrong here. Shemaiah is urging Nehemiah to enter the temple improperly, in a way that would violate the boundaries God had established.

And Nehemiah recognizes that this supposed prophetic warning is not from God. Verse 12 tells us that Tobiah and Sanballat had hired Shemaiah. Their goal was to frighten Nehemiah into doing something wrong so they could damage his reputation. Think about the strategy.

They want Nehemiah to believe that the safest thing he can do is actually something that would compromise his obedience to God. And that's where the passage becomes particularly searching.

Because fear can make disobedience seem reasonable. Fear can convince us that we have no other choice. Fear can make compromise look like wisdom. And sometimes, when we're afraid, we begin treating the relief of our fear as more important than faithfulness to God.

But I want you to notice something else about this situation. Nehemiah is receiving advice. And on the surface, it sounds like pretty good advice!

"Nehemiah, you're in danger. People are coming to kill you. You need to get somewhere safe."

That sounds reasonable, doesn't it? And it's coming from someone who is presenting himself as speaking for God! But here's the problem.

Advice doesn't become godly simply because it comes from a religious person. And advice doesn't become wise simply because it sounds reasonable.

Christians receive all kinds of advice today. Sometimes from friends. Sometimes from family members. Sometimes from counselors, coworkers, people we respect, and even other Christians. And much of that advice is offered with genuinely good intentions. But good intentions do not automatically make advice good.

Sometimes the advice we receive is entirely inconsistent with what God has told us in His Word. Think about how often people are encouraged to compromise their convictions.

In our relationships, someone might tell us, "You deserve to be happy. You shouldn't have to keep working through something this difficult."

Now, there are certainly relationships where serious harm requires protection and intervention. But there are also times when people encourage us to abandon commitments simply because faithfulness has become difficult.

Or consider the advice people receive about sexual relationships. "You're in love. You're committed to each other. Why should you wait?" It sounds compassionate. It sounds reasonable. But sincere feelings do not erase the boundaries God has established for sexual intimacy.

Or maybe it's a matter of integrity. "Everybody does it. Nobody is going to know. You have to look out for yourself." And suddenly dishonesty is being presented as wisdom.

Or perhaps it's a matter of biblical conviction. "Just go along with it. You don't have to believe it. You don't have to agree with it. Just don't make an issue out of it."

Now, there are plenty of things Christians can disagree about, and we should be gracious and humble in those disagreements.

But when we're being asked to affirm something Scripture forbids—or deny something Scripture teaches—keeping the peace cannot become more important than obedience to God.

And here's what makes all of this so dangerous.

The advice doesn't always sound like temptation. Sometimes it sounds like someone looking out for your best interests.

But there's something else here that I don't want us to miss. Shemaiah is promising Nehemiah safety. He's offering him a way out of danger. He's essentially saying, "Nehemiah, if you'll just do what I'm telling you to do, you can avoid all of this."

And isn't that how compromise often presents itself? It promises relief. It promises comfort. It promises that we won't have to face the consequences of standing firm. Just go along with it, and nobody will be upset. Just compromise a little, and the relationship will be easier. Just keep your convictions to yourself, and you won't have to deal with the criticism. Just do what everybody else is doing, and you won't feel so different.

And suddenly, we're being invited to find safety and comfort in something that runs contrary to God's Word.

But here's what I find especially important about Nehemiah. He recognizes that the advice is wrong. He understands that someone claiming to speak for God is actually encouraging him to disobey God. And that raises a question for us.

Would we recognize it? What happens when somebody gives us advice that sounds reasonable, compassionate, and reassuring—but contradicts Scripture? What happens when the person giving that advice is someone we trust? What happens when they tell us exactly what we want to hear? And what happens when we don't know God's Word well enough to recognize the difference? That's a frightening possibility, isn't it?

Because if we don't know what God has said, how will we recognize when somebody tells us something different?

We can begin confusing what our culture considers normal with what Scripture calls righteous. We can begin confusing what feels loving with what God actually commands. We can begin confusing what makes us comfortable with what makes us faithful. And before long, we're making decisions based on whatever sounds most reasonable to us at the moment.

Church, you cannot measure advice against a standard you do not know. That's why spending time in Scripture matters. Not simply so we can answer Bible trivia questions. Not simply so we can win theological arguments. But because we need God's Word to shape the way we think, the way we make decisions, the way we evaluate what we're being told, and the way we live.

Psalm 119:105 says, "Your word is a lamp for my feet and a light on my path." Notice what that means. God's Word helps us see where we're going. It illuminates the path before us.

And when someone invites us to take a different path—especially one that promises to be easier or more comfortable—we have something by which to evaluate that invitation.

But if we aren't familiar with Scripture, we're much more likely to confuse a comfortable path with a faithful one.

And let me add something important. Knowing Scripture doesn't mean we never need advice. Quite the opposite. God gives us pastors, teachers, mature believers, and the fellowship of the church to help us grow in wisdom and understanding. But even the advice of people we respect must be evaluated in light of God's Word.

And when we don't understand what Scripture teaches, that's not a reason to give up and follow whatever sounds best. It's a reason to open our Bibles, ask questions, seek wise counsel, and learn. Because the question isn't simply whether advice sounds good. The question is whether it agrees with what God has said.

And Nehemiah understands that the safest place for his soul is not necessarily the place that promises the greatest physical security.

It's the place of obedience to God.

The measure of godly counsel is whether it leads us toward faithfulness to God.

Nehemiah refuses. He will not allow fear to determine what obedience looks like. And he will not violate God's Word simply because someone has convinced him that doing so might make him safer.

Not every fear deserves your obedience. And not every voice offering you advice deserves your trust.

And notice that he doesn't pretend the threats aren't real. He knows these men are dangerous. He knows they want to harm him. But he also knows that fear is not a trustworthy authority for determining what God has called him to do.

Not every fear deserves your obedience. Some fears should lead us to take wise precautions. Some fears should lead us to seek help. Some fears alert us to genuine danger. But fear must never become our master. Nehemiah refuses to sin in order to make himself feel safe.

And then, in verse 15, we finally reach the moment we've been waiting for. "So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days." Fifty-two days! After all the ridicule, threats, exhaustion, internal conflict, accusations, and intimidation, the wall is finished.

And verse 16 tells us that when their enemies heard about it, they were discouraged because they recognized that the work had been accomplished with God's help. Don't miss that.

Nehemiah has been faithful. The people have persevered. But ultimately, **God receives the credit for the work.** And yet the chapter doesn't end with everybody living happily ever after.

Verses 17–19 tell us that Tobiah continues corresponding with influential people in Judah. Some are bound to him by family relationships and obligations. They speak well of him to Nehemiah while passing Nehemiah's words back to Tobiah.

The wall is finished. But the opposition hasn't completely disappeared. And that's an important reminder. Faithfulness doesn't guarantee that every difficult person will change. It doesn't guarantee that every conflict will disappear. It doesn't guarantee that everybody will eventually understand or approve of what God has called you to do. Sometimes you finish the assignment while some of the problems remain unresolved.

The work can be finished even when the opposition isn't. And that brings us to the most important question of all.

THE GOSPEL AND CONCLUSION

Nehemiah knew what God had entrusted to him. He refused to abandon it for distractions, accusations, or fear. And through God's gracious provision, the wall was completed. But Nehemiah wasn't perfect. And neither are we.

There have been times when we've allowed lesser things to crowd out what matters most. Times when we've been more concerned about what people thought of us than what God called us to do.

Times when fear has shaped our decisions more than faith. And that's why we need more than Nehemiah's example. **We need a Savior.**

In John 17:4, Jesus prays to the Father, "I have glorified you on the earth by completing the work you gave me to do."

And on the cross, Jesus declares, "It is finished."

Jesus did not abandon the work the Father gave Him. He wasn't diverted by the expectations of the crowds. He wasn't turned aside by the accusations of His enemies. And He did not turn away from the suffering of the cross. He faithfully accomplished the work of our redemption. And because He finished that work, we can be saved by grace through faith in Him.

We don't earn God's favor by being more disciplined, better organized, or more successful at completing our responsibilities. We receive His grace. And that grace begins reshaping our priorities. It teaches us to love what God loves. To value what God values. To be faithful with what God has entrusted to us.

So let me ask you something this morning.

What is the important work God has placed before you?

Perhaps it's being more present in your marriage. Perhaps it's investing in your children while you still have the opportunity. Perhaps it's recovering the priority of worship and fellowship with God's people. Perhaps it's a ministry God has called you to serve in, a relationship that needs attention, or a step of obedience you've been putting off.

And then ask yourself another question. **What keeps pulling you away from it?** What invitations, opportunities, fears, or demands have been determining your priorities? What are you saying yes to that is causing you to say no to something God has already entrusted to you?

You don't have to accept every invitation. You don't have to pursue every opportunity. You don't have to answer every accusation. And you don't have to obey every fear.

You can trust the Lord, seek His wisdom, and remain faithful to the work He has placed before you. Because sometimes the most important act of obedience isn't finding something new to do. **It's refusing to abandon what God has already given you to do.**

So remember Nehemiah's words. **"I am doing important work and cannot come down."**

And by God's grace, may we have the wisdom to recognize that work, the courage to protect it, and the faithfulness to finish it.