

NEHEMIAH: THE WORK BEFORE US

Keep Building

Nehemiah 4:1–23

MAIN IDEA

Faithfulness does not require the absence of opposition, fear, or weariness. It means trusting God, guarding what He has entrusted to us, and continuing the work He has placed before us.

THE WORK HAS BECOME REAL

At the end of Nehemiah 2, the people said, **“Let’s start rebuilding.”**

In Nehemiah 3, they did. Everybody had a section. Priests, goldsmiths, merchants, officials, fathers, daughters, and even a perfume maker had sections of the wall. They worked on one section after another. And there was one name after another. One ordinary act of faithfulness after another.

And by the beginning of chapter 4, something has happened that a man named Sanballat can no longer ignore. **The wall is actually going up.** That matters because opposition often changes when obedience starts producing visible results.

It is one thing to talk about rebuilding. It is another thing when **the gaps start closing.** Nehemiah 4 is about what happens when the work God has placed before us becomes difficult. There is opposition from outside. And there is discouragement inside. There is rubble everywhere. There are tired workers. There are legitimate threats. And right in the middle of all of it, Nehemiah says, **“Don’t be afraid of them. Remember the great and awe-inspiring Lord.”**

The answer isn’t, **“Believe in yourself.”** The answer is, **“Remember the Lord.”** And then, **Keep building.**

1. BE CAREFUL WHICH VOICES YOU ALLOW TO INFLUENCE YOU

Nehemiah 4:1–6

Sanballat has been with us since chapter 2.

Before Nehemiah ever repaired a stone, Sanballat was displeased that someone had arrived seeking the welfare of Jerusalem. When Nehemiah announced the rebuilding, Sanballat mocked him. Now the work has actually begun, and Sanballat is furious.

A. Sanballat could tolerate a broken Jerusalem better than a rebuilt Jerusalem.

The progression matters here. Someone wants Jerusalem to prosper. **Sanballat is displeased.** Jerusalem decides to rebuild. **Sanballat mocks.** Jerusalem actually starts rebuilding. **Sanballat becomes enraged.** Soon the gaps begin closing. **Sanballat begins conspiring to stop it.**

We should be careful about assigning motives the text doesn't explicitly give us. But Sanballat clearly occupies a position of regional influence, and a secure, organized Jerusalem changes the existing situation.

There is a principle here. **Some people become uncomfortable when the gaps start closing because they had become comfortable with the gaps.** That can happen in our lives.

Sometimes people are comfortable with us as long as we remain the version of ourselves to which they have become accustomed. Your healing may require somebody else to adjust. Your boundaries may change somebody else's access. A healthier marriage may disrupt unhealthy relationships surrounding it. A flourishing ministry may require somebody to surrender influence or preferences they previously enjoyed.

Growth changes things. Rebuilding changes things. And not everyone who was comfortable with the broken version will celebrate the rebuilding. Faithful obedience really can disrupt established relationships because relationships develop expectations about who we are and how we will behave.

Sometimes people are comfortable with us as long as we remain the version of ourselves to which they have become accustomed.

And when God begins changing something in us, it can change the relationships around us. Your healing may require somebody else to adjust. Your boundaries may change somebody else's access. Your obedience may make somebody else uncomfortable.

A healthier marriage may disrupt unhealthy relationships surrounding it. Because when God starts closing some gaps, people who had grown accustomed to those gaps may not always celebrate.

Think about a teenager who decides, **“I’m going to honor Christ with my sexuality. I’m going to remain abstinent.”** That teenager hasn't attacked anybody. They haven't condemned their friends. They haven't demanded that everybody around them make the same decision.

They're simply saying, **“Because I belong to Jesus, there are some boundaries I’m going to establish in my life.”** But that conviction may make somebody else uncomfortable.

Or imagine a young adult who decides, **“I’m not going to drink.”** Maybe they've watched what alcohol has done in their family. Maybe they know their own vulnerabilities. Maybe they've simply concluded that abstaining is the wisest way for them to honor Christ. They don't have to announce that everybody who drinks is wicked. They don't have to become self-righteous about it.

They can simply say, **“This is a guardrail I need in my life.”** But suddenly somebody starts asking, “What's wrong with you?” “You used to be fun.” “Come on, one isn't going to hurt you.” “Why are you making such a big deal about this?”

Why does your boundary bother them? Sometimes it's because **your conviction has changed the terms of the relationship.**

Or suppose someone realizes that a particular friendship has become unhealthy. Every conversation becomes gossip. Every gathering becomes complaining. Every interaction pulls them toward bitterness. So they decide, **“I love this person, but I cannot continue participating in this relationship in the same way.”**

That doesn't necessarily mean cutting the person out of their life. It may simply mean changing the access that person has. And the other person may not like it. Because, **Your boundaries may change somebody else's access.**

That can happen in a marriage too. A husband and wife begin trying to build a healthier marriage, and they realize they've allowed parents, siblings, friends, or even their own children too much influence inside something God intended husband and wife to guard. So, they establish some boundaries.

“We're not going to discuss every disagreement in our marriage with our parents.” “We're going to make this decision together.” “We love you, but this is something we need to work through as husband and wife.” Nobody has been attacked. Nobody has been declared the enemy. **They're simply guarding what God has entrusted to them.**

And somebody may still be offended because what feels like a healthy boundary to you can feel like lost access to someone who had grown accustomed to having it. That's why boundaries require both **wisdom and humility.**

Not every boundary we establish is automatically biblical merely because we call it a boundary. Sometimes “I'm setting a boundary” can become respectable language for selfishness, avoidance, unforgiveness, or refusing necessary accountability. Our boundaries have to be measured by Scripture and established in love.

But there are times when obedience to Jesus will require us to say, **“I can't go there anymore. I can't participate in that anymore. I can't allow that voice to have the influence it once had. I can't keep relating to you in exactly the same way.”** And none of that should surprise us. Because Jesus Himself has always made people uncomfortable.

Not because He was unnecessarily abrasive. Not because He enjoyed confrontation. Not because He went looking for people to offend. But because **holiness exposes what we have learned to normalize.**

Jesus could sit at a table with sinners and love them genuinely while never adjusting the line of righteousness to make everybody at the table comfortable. He could welcome people without affirming everything in their lives. He could love people without surrendering His obedience to the Father. And if we're following Him, there will inevitably be moments when our obedience changes our relationships.

So, here's the question. **Am I building a wall because I hate the people outside it, or am I establishing a guardrail because I love what God has entrusted to me inside it?**

That's a very different thing. Nehemiah isn't building because he hates Sanballat. He's building because he loves Jerusalem. And that's the spirit in which Christians establish godly boundaries.

Not, **“How can I keep everybody away?”** But, **“What has God entrusted to me that is worth faithfully protecting?”**

Your marriage **is worth a boundary**. Your children **are worth a boundary**. Your integrity **is worth a boundary**. Your sobriety **is worth a boundary**. Your sexual purity **is worth a boundary**. Your spiritual health **is worth a boundary**. And your relationship with Christ is absolutely worth guarding.

Now, the boundaries will not look exactly the same for everybody. Wisdom matters. Circumstances differ. Scripture and not our preferences has to establish the lines. But there are things God has entrusted to you that are simply **too valuable to leave unguarded**.

Sometimes love says **yes**. Sometimes love says **no**. Sometimes faithfulness says, **“You are welcome here, but that behavior is not.”** Sometimes wisdom says, **“I love you, but you cannot have the same access you once had.”** Sometimes integrity says, **“Everybody else may be doing it, but I won't.”** Sometimes discipleship says, **“That may be permissible for somebody else, but it isn't wise for me.”**

And sometimes obedience to Jesus simply says, **“This is where the line is.”**

Not because we're angry. Not because we're afraid. Not because we're trying to control everybody outside the wall. But because **God has entrusted something precious to us inside it.**

Nehemiah wasn't building the wall because he hated Sanballat. **He was building because Jerusalem was worth protecting.** And there are some things in your life that are worth protecting too. Establish the boundary. Guard the gate. Protect what God has entrusted to you.

And then remember, **the purpose of the boundary isn't the boundary.** The purpose is what God is building inside it.

And when those boundaries change somebody else's access or expectations, remember, **You can love somebody without giving them unrestricted influence over what God has entrusted to you.**

Some people become uncomfortable when the gaps start closing because they had become comfortable with the gaps. **Keep loving them. Keep walking humbly. Keep your heart open to correction.** But if the boundary you are setting is faithful to Christ and God's word, then **keep building.**

B. Negativity is an effective recruiter

Sanballat doesn't keep his contempt to himself.

He speaks before his associates and the army of Samaria. Then Tobiah joins him, "Indeed, even if a fox climbed up what they are building, he would break down their stone wall!"

Then later the opposition grows. Sanballat. Tobiah. The Arabs. The Ammonites. The Ashdodites. **Negativity is an effective recruiter.**

One cynical voice can change the atmosphere of a room. One persistently negative person can reshape the spirit of a family. One corrosive voice can discourage an entire ministry team. And one person's criticism can sometimes become louder in our minds than twenty people's encouragement. **Not every voice deserves equal influence in your life.**

That does **not** mean surrounding yourself only with people who agree with you. We need correction. We need accountability. We need people who love us enough to say, **“You’re wrong.”**

But there is a difference between **CORRECTION** and **CORROSION**. A corrective voice helps me see more clearly so that I can become more faithful. A corrosive voice continually makes faithfulness seem foolish, obedience seem impossible, and every pile of rubble seem larger than God.

C. Be careful who gets to interpret your rubble

Sanballat looks at Jerusalem and essentially says, **“Look at these weak people. Look at that rubble. They’ll never do this.”** And something disturbing happens later in the chapter. By verse 10, Judah is saying, “The strength of the laborer fails, since there is so much rubble. We will never be able to rebuild the wall.”

Sanballat's words and Judah's words aren't identical. But the movement is sobering. The discouraging voice outside the wall begins to sound increasingly similar to the discouraged voice inside the wall.

If you listen to a corrosive voice long enough, eventually you may start repeating what it has been telling you. Ask yourself, **“Whose voice are you allowing to interpret the rubble in your life?”**

Sanballat has a voice. Your fear has a voice. Your exhaustion has a voice. But **God has spoken**. And His voice has the final say.

2. PRAY — AND PREPARE

Nehemiah 4:4–9

Nehemiah's first response to Sanballat is prayer. He doesn't get into a shouting match. He doesn't organize a public-relations campaign. He takes the opposition to God.

Then verse 6 gives us one of the simplest responses imaginable. **“So we rebuilt the wall...”** They prayed. And then they went back to work. But the opposition escalates. By verses 7–8, Sanballat and the others are conspiring to attack Jerusalem. And verse 9 gives us an extraordinarily

healthy theology of dependence upon God. **“So we prayed to our God and stationed a guard because of them day and night.”**

They prayed. **And they posted a guard.**

A. Trusting God does not mean ignoring reality

They didn't say, **“God will protect us. Posting a guard would demonstrate a lack of faith.”** Nor did they say, **“We have guards now. We don't need prayer.”** They prayed. And they prepared.

Trust in God and responsible action are not competitors. Preparation is not the opposite of dependence upon God. Sometimes preparation is an expression of faithful dependence upon God.

Faith prays. Faith trusts. Faith also does what wisdom requires.

B. There is a difference between being prepared for a fight and looking for one

This becomes even clearer later in the chapter. Nehemiah doesn't raise an army and march into Samaria. He doesn't go looking for Sanballat. He doesn't make defeating Sanballat the mission. **The mission is still rebuilding Jerusalem.**

The defensive measures exist to protect the work. **Nehemiah didn't build an army and go looking for a battle. He armed the builders and kept building.**

That matters for Christians. There is a corner of Christian culture that seems perpetually ready for another fight. Another controversy. Another person to expose. Another Christian to denounce. Another reaction video. Another battle.

Sometimes error really does need to be confronted. Biblical discernment matters. But biblical discernment is not the same thing as developing an appetite for conflict. Nehemiah isn't spoiling for a fight. **He's trying to build a wall.** And that gives us an important principle.

The weapons were there to protect the work; the weapons were never allowed to become the work. Valuable things require appropriate protection. *

C. Guard what God has entrusted to you

If God has given you something to build, there will be things worth guarding. A marriage. A family. Children. A friendship. A small group. A ministry. A church.

Healthy marriages need guards on the wall. Maybe a husband and wife decide, “We don't threaten divorce when we're angry. We don't call each other names. We don't weaponize things shared in confidence. We don't pull the children into our disagreement. We don't recruit other people to take our side.” A quick word to the “corrosive coalition builders out there.

When you are frustrated with somebody, don't start recruiting people to share your frustration. Don't make the phone calls, send the texts, and gather a little circle of people who have only heard your side until your offense becomes everybody's offense.

That's not reconciliation. **That's recruitment.** Scripture calls us toward one another, not around one another. If there's a problem, go to the person. Speak truthfully. Seek peace. Pursue reconciliation. Because **negativity is an effective recruiter and contention rarely stays contained.**

Think about a playground surrounded by a fence. Especially with little children, you're thankful for that fence. It keeps a toddler from wandering into the parking lot or the street.

But nobody takes their children to the playground and says, “**Kids, look at this magnificent fence! We're going to spend the next hour studying everything this fence keeps you away from.**”

Because **the fence isn't the playground.** The fence exists to create a protected place where something good can happen inside. Christian families need fences. There are voices we don't want shaping our children. There are influences that shouldn't have unrestricted access. There are times when Mom and Dad need to say no.

But we're not raising children merely to know everything Christians should avoid. **We're building something.** We want them to know Jesus is good. We want them to love His Word. We want homes filled with laughter, grace, repentance, forgiveness, generosity, courage, compassion, and service. We want them to experience the joy of following Jesus.

The fence exists because there is something beautiful worth protecting inside it. The weapons were there to protect the work; the weapons were never allowed to become the work.

Sword at the side. Trowel in the hand. Watch carefully. But keep building. **Don't become so consumed with what you're against that you neglect what God has called you to build.**

3. DON'T LET WEARINESS INTERPRET THE RUBBLE

Nehemiah 4:10–14

Now the threat changes. Until this point, the voices have largely been outside. But verse 10 says, “The strength of the laborer fails, since there is so much rubble. We will never be able to rebuild the wall.” This isn't Sanballat talking. **This is Judah.** The people doing the work are tired.

And notice something important. Their problems aren't imaginary. There really is a lot of rubble. They really are tired. Their enemies really are threatening them. Faith doesn't require pretending those things aren't true. But weariness can distort the conclusions we draw from things that are true.

Earlier, verse 6 told us, “The people had the will to keep working.” Now it's, “We will never be able to rebuild the wall.” Same people. Same God. Same wall. What's changed? **They're tired. Weariness changes how we see things. When you're tired, the rubble starts looking bigger than the wall.**

Weariness has a way of turning “this is hard” into “this is impossible.” That happens in marriages. **“We're never going to get better.”** Parenting. **“I'm failing these kids.”** Ministry. **“Nothing we're doing is making any difference.”**

Fighting sin. **“I'm never going to change.”** Caregiving. **“I can't keep doing this.”** Sometimes the most spiritual thing you can recognize is, **“I am tired.”** Not every conclusion that we reach in exhaustion deserves to become a conviction.

And remember, the enemy wants to interpret the rubble for you. The enemy sees the rubble and says, **“You're weak.”** Weariness sees the rubble and says, **“We can't.”** But Nehemiah directs their eyes somewhere else.

Verse 14, **“Don't be afraid of them. Remember the great and awe-inspiring Lord...”** He doesn't say, **“Remember how talented you are.”** He doesn't say, **“Remember how strong you are.”** He doesn't say, **“Believe in yourselves.”**

He says, **“Remember the Lord.”** That's the answer to the Sanballats around us. That's also the answer to our internal fears. That's the answer to weariness. The answer is not positive thinking. We cannot “manifest” this on our own. The answer is remembering **the truth about God.**

Don't merely look at what is against you. Remember who is over you. Yes, the rubble is real. Yes, Sanballat is real, and we've all got at least one. Yes, the exhaustion is real. And yes, the threat is real. But none of them is **the greatest reality.** God is.

4. REMEMBER THE LORD — AND KEEP BUILDING

Nehemiah 4:15–23

Nehemiah now organizes the people for both work and protection. Some of the people work while some of them stand guard. Those carrying materials work with one hand and hold a weapon with the other. Builders wear swords at their sides. A trumpeter remains near Nehemiah. Because the workers are spread out, if the trumpet sounds, everyone knows where to rally.

And then Nehemiah says, **“Our God will fight for us!”** Notice the balance. They have swords. They have guards. They have a trumpet. They have a plan. They are organized. They are prepared.

And after doing everything wisdom requires, their confidence remains, **“Our God will fight for us!”** The sword isn't their savior. The plan isn't their savior. Nehemiah isn't their savior. **God is.**

Prepared — but not preoccupied

The chapter ends by emphasizing just how vigilant they remained. They work from dawn until the stars appear. Those who might normally leave Jerusalem remain inside so they can serve as guards. Nehemiah says that he, his brothers, his servants, and the guards **stayed ready.**

They didn't get comfortable and assume the threat had disappeared. But here's the crucial thing, **they kept working.** They were prepared for opposition without becoming consumed by opposition.

It provides a bit of a biblical balance for us as we go about rebuilding the things in our lives God has led us to. **Be watchful enough that opposition doesn't surprise you, but faithful enough that opposition doesn't consume you.** The sword remains at the side. **The trowel remains in the hand.**

Sometimes the answer is another stone

Sanballat has mocked them. Tobiah has ridiculed them. Enemies have threatened them. Workers have become exhausted. There is rubble everywhere. And what do God's people do? They put another stone in the wall. And another. And then another.

Sometimes the best answer to a voice telling you the work cannot be done is another stone in the wall. Pray. Prepare. Remember the Lord. **Keep building.**

THE GOSPEL — BUILD ON THE CORNERSTONE

But we have to be careful. Because **“Keep building”** can easily become, “Try harder. Be stronger. Don't quit. Believe in yourself. That's not the gospel. The gospel begins somewhere completely different.

Ephesians 2:8–10 — Grace first, then work

“For you are saved by grace through faith... not from works... For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us to do.”

There's the order. **Grace first.** Then work. We don't build so that God will love us. We don't work our way into His favor. We don't establish our worth through our productivity. We are rescued by grace. We are made God's own by grace. And then God places good work before us.

We don't keep building because we believe in ourselves. We keep building because we believe in the God who saved us, made us His own, and prepared good works for us to walk in.

Sanballat says, “**Look how weak you are.**” But the gospel doesn't require me to answer, “**Actually, I'm pretty impressive.**” I can answer that accusation of being weak by saying, “**You may be right about my weakness. But you're wrong about my God. His grace is sufficient.**”

Maybe you're looking at a lot of rubble right now. Maybe Sanballat's voice has gotten loud. Maybe somebody has become uncomfortable because some gaps in your life are beginning to close. Maybe you've heard the negative voices so long that you've started repeating them yourself. Or maybe you're simply tired.

And somewhere along the way, “**This is hard**” became “**This is impossible.**” But before you walk away from the work, remember something we said earlier.

Think again about that playground surrounded by a fence. A father doesn't stand there admiring the fence. He looks through the fence and sees his children. **That's why the fence matters.** The fence matters because what's inside it matters. And maybe that's what somebody needs to remember this morning.

You're tired of working on the marriage. But look again at what God has entrusted to you. You're exhausted from raising those children. But look again at what God has entrusted to you.

You're weary of fighting for integrity when compromise would be easier. You're tired of guarding your sobriety. You're tired of maintaining those boundaries. You're tired of serving that ministry. You're tired of picking through the rubble and wondering whether anything you're doing is making a difference. **Look again at what God has entrusted to you.**

Some things are worth protecting. And some things are worth rebuilding. The presence of rubble doesn't mean the work isn't worth doing. **Rubble is what rebuilding looks like before the work is finished.** And that's exactly where Nehemiah's people were.

There was still rubble everywhere. There were still enemies outside. There were still tired people inside. The wall wasn't finished. But stone by stone, gap by gap, section by section, **God was doing something in the rubble.** And He still is.

That's why Nehemiah doesn't tell those exhausted people to look inside themselves and discover how strong they are. He says, **“Remember the great and awe-inspiring Lord.”** Remember the Lord. Remember the God who saved you by grace. Remember the God who calls you His workmanship. Remember the God who prepared good works beforehand for you to walk in. And remember the Stone the builders rejected.

Jesus Christ has become the **Cornerstone**. So, when everything around you feels crooked, come back to the Cornerstone. When the voices around you tell you how you ought to build your life, come back to the Cornerstone. When you discover that something in your life is out of line with Him, remember. **The Cornerstone doesn't move. I do.**

And here's the good news. The gospel doesn't say, **“Get yourself straightened out and start building.”** The gospel says that the One who is the Cornerstone is also the One who saves us by grace.

We are His workmanship. We are building on Christ, **while God is building Christlikeness into us.** So tomorrow morning, you may wake up and the marriage still needs work. The children will still need parenting. The temptation may still need resisting. The boundary may still need guarding. The ministry may still be difficult.

And there may still be rubble at your feet. But don't mistake unfinished for abandoned. **God does some of His most beautiful work in places that still look like construction sites.**

Guard what He has entrusted to you. Protect what is precious. Don't spend all your time staring at Sanballat. Don't let weariness interpret the rubble.

Remember the Lord. Protect what is precious. And by His grace, **keep building.**