

NEHEMIAH: THE WORK BEFORE US

When Grace Meets Resistance

Nehemiah 2:9–20

Preached on Sunday Sept. 6, 2026

Main Idea:

The gracious hand of God does not guarantee an easy road; it gives us confidence to continue faithfully when opposition comes.

Living Around What is Broken

Last week, as we began our journey through Nehemiah, I talked about having a loose step in the house. Everybody knows the step is broken. Everybody knows exactly where to put their foot. You warn the kids about it. You warn visitors about it. You learn how to step over it or around it. And eventually something strange happens. We have organized everybody's behavior around something that really needs to be repaired.

Instead of fixing the step, we have simply gotten very good at living with the broken step. Well, Jerusalem had essentially done the same thing.

When we hear about the exile of God's people, sometimes we imagine that one day everybody was carried off to Babylon and then, years later, everybody came home. It wasn't that simple.

Jerusalem fell to Babylon in 586 BC. The city was devastated. The temple was destroyed. Many of the people were carried into exile. Then Persia conquered Babylon. Cyrus permitted God's people to begin returning home. And those returns happened in stages.

The first major return came under Zerubbabel, beginning around 538 BC. The great work of that generation was rebuilding the temple. About eighty years later, Ezra arrived. His great concern was the spiritual condition of God's people and restoring them around God's Word. And then, around 445 BC, Nehemiah comes. That means God's people had begun returning to Jerusalem nearly a century before Nehemiah arrived.

The temple had been rebuilt. Worship was taking place. People were living in Jerusalem. Ezra had been teaching God's Word. And the walls were still broken.

An entire generation had lived with it. And then another. Sometimes broken things can remain broken for a very long time because everybody has simply learned to live around them. Eventually, what should be unacceptable becomes normal. And God raises up Nehemiah to look at something everybody else has learned to live around and say, "By God's grace, this doesn't have to remain this way."

Last week we watched that grace at work. Nehemiah acknowledged what was broken. He owned his responsibility. He trusted God. He received grace. And when the door opened, he walked through it. The king gave him permission. The king gave him letters. The king gave him timber.

And Nehemiah told us why. "The gracious hand of my God was on me." We ended last week simply. Get to work. Well, this week Nehemiah gets out the tools. And he discovers something almost immediately. Not everybody is happy about the repair. That's where our passage takes us today.

Because God's grace meets us in broken places so that we can move forward in faithful obedience. But Nehemiah is going to teach us something else about grace. The gracious hand of God does not remove every obstacle before us. Instead, God's grace gives us confidence to remain faithful through the obstacles.

1. GRACE DISRUPTS WHAT BROKENNESS HAS NORMALIZED

Nehemiah 2:9–10

Nehemiah finally arrives in the region. And he doesn't arrive unnoticed. Verse 9 tells us that Nehemiah presents the king's letters to the governors beyond the Euphrates. And then we're told, "The king had also sent officers of the infantry and cavalry with me." That is significant. Nehemiah has an imperial escort.

Ezra had made a point of not requesting military protection for his journey. But Nehemiah's mission is different. Nehemiah isn't coming only to teach God's people.

He is arriving with authorization from Artaxerxes to undertake significant work in Jerusalem. Imagine what the regional leaders see. Here comes an official from the Persian court. He's carrying royal letters. He's accompanied by military officers and cavalry. And he's heading toward Jerusalem. People are going to notice.

Two men in particular notice. Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official. These aren't random names. Sanballat is associated with Samaria. Tobiah is associated with Ammon. Those places carry long histories of tension with God's people.

And these men will become recurring characters in Nehemiah's story. But look carefully at verse 10. What has Nehemiah done to them? Nothing. He hasn't built anything. He hasn't attacked them. He hasn't insulted them. Nehemiah hasn't laid a single stone. And yet they are greatly displeased. Why?

Because, the text says, someone had come “to pursue the prosperity of the Israelites.” That's it. Somebody has arrived who wants good for God's people. And that disturbs them. That corrects an assumption we sometimes make. We can begin to believe, *“If God is really in this, surely everybody will recognize it.”* Not necessarily.

If my motives are good, nobody will object. Not necessarily.

If I've prayed about this and God has opened the door, surely the road ahead will be relatively smooth. Nehemiah says, “Not necessarily.”

Answered prayer does not translate into an absence of opposition. Sometimes answered prayer moves us directly into opposition. And perhaps there is something deeper happening here.

For nearly a century Jerusalem has existed with broken walls. The regional arrangement has developed around a weak Jerusalem. Everybody knows where Jerusalem fits. Everybody knows what Jerusalem can and cannot do.

Then Nehemiah shows up saying, “We're going to repair what is broken.” And suddenly the arrangement is threatened. That's something we see in life.

Systems develop around broken things. Families do it. Relationships do it. Workplaces do it. Churches can do it. We even do it internally. When something has been broken long enough, we don't merely become accustomed to it.

Sometimes we develop ways of functioning that depend upon it remaining that way. Then somebody says, "Let's fix the step." And suddenly the response isn't always, "*What a wonderful idea!*"

Sometimes the response is, "*Why? We've always managed. Who asked you? What's wrong with the way things are?*" Because repair changes the arrangement everyone has become accustomed to. Grace disrupts what brokenness has normalized.

And when it does, don't automatically assume resistance means grace has disappeared.

2. FAITH LOOKS HONESTLY AT THE WORK BEFORE US

Nehemiah 2:11–16

Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem. After this enormous journey, after months of prayer, after standing before the king, after receiving permission and resources, Nehemiah arrives. And does...nothing. For three days.

The man who has traveled hundreds of miles to rebuild Jerusalem does not ride through the gate shouting, "Everybody grab a hammer!" He waits.

Then verse 12 says, "I got up at night and took a few men with me. I didn't tell anyone what my God had laid on my heart to do for Jerusalem."

There is an important phrase. "What my God had laid on my heart."

Last week Nehemiah said, "The gracious hand of my God was on me." Now, "What my God had laid on my heart." Who initiated this work? God did. Nehemiah is participating in something God has initiated.

The people will participate. The builders will participate. In chapter 3, entire families will participate. Priests will participate. Craftsmen will participate. Merchants will participate. Everybody will have a section of the wall.

Human participation is essential. But the initiative belongs to God. God's work begins with God. And because Nehemiah believes God has called him to this work, he takes the work seriously enough to understand it.

He goes out at night. He sees the Valley Gate. The Serpent's Well. The Dung Gate. The Fountain Gate. He sees burned gates. He observes the collapsed walls. He inspects piles of rubble. Eventually the destruction is so severe that the animal underneath him cannot even get through.

Nehemiah looks carefully. He does not confuse faith with optimism. He doesn't ride around saying, *"You know, this really isn't that bad."* No. It is that bad. Faith doesn't require Nehemiah to pretend the rubble isn't there.

Faith gives him the courage to look directly at the rubble because he knows the rubble isn't the whole story. Last week we said, "Acknowledge what is broken." Now we take another step. Understand what rebuilding will actually require.

There is wisdom here. Look. Listen. Learn. Understand. Pray. Then move.

Faithful obedience isn't reckless. There is a difference between saying, *"God has called me to something, so I'm going to charge ahead without thinking,"* and saying, *"God has called me to something, so I want to understand faithfully what obedience requires."*

Nehemiah isn't hesitant. He's deliberate. There are times when faith means moving immediately. There are also times when faith means taking a good look before you move. Both can be obedience. And Nehemiah takes a good look at the work before him.

3. REMEMBERED GRACE STRENGTHENS OUR HANDS

Nehemiah 2:17–18

Then Nehemiah finally speaks to the people. And it is interesting how he does it. Listen to verse 17. "You see the trouble we are in." We. Until now, much of this story has been Nehemiah's. I prayed. I asked. I traveled. I arrived. I inspected.

But when Nehemiah finally gathers God's people, he doesn't stand over them and say, "Look at the mess you people have made."

He says, “You see the trouble we are in.” That's the same spirit we saw in Nehemiah's prayer in chapter 1. He didn't pray, “*Lord, look at everything those people have done.*” He prayed, “Both I and my father's family have sinned.” And now its “the trouble we are in.”

Nehemiah has made their problem his problem. Remember what we said last week. Something doesn't have to be your fault for it to become your responsibility. Nehemiah didn't tear down this wall. He didn't burn these gates. He didn't create the circumstances that produced this mess. But God put the work in front of him.

And Nehemiah accepted responsibility for doing something about it. Then he says, “Come, let's rebuild Jerusalem's wall, so that we will no longer be a disgrace.”

But notice what he does next. Nehemiah doesn't simply give them a strategic plan. He tells them a story about grace.

Verse 18. “I told them how the gracious hand of my God had been on me...”

There it is again. The gracious hand of God. Nehemiah tells them what God has already done. The king said yes. The letters were granted. The timber was supplied. The journey was completed. They are standing together in Jerusalem. Look what God has already done.

And there is an important principle here. Testimony to past grace produces courage for present obedience. Sometimes the work before us looks overwhelming because all we can see is the rubble. And sometimes we need to look backward long enough to remember, “God has already been faithful.”

There have been other impossible days. There have been other prayers. There have been other doors. There have been other moments when you didn't know how God was going to provide. And somehow, here you are.

Not because you figured everything out. Not because you were strong enough. But because the gracious hand of God has been upon you. Remembered grace strengthens us for present obedience.

And look at the people's response. “Let's start rebuilding.”

And then Scripture says, “Their hands were strengthened to do this good work.” What a beautiful picture. In chapter 2, verse 8, God's gracious hand was upon Nehemiah. And now in verse 18, the people's hands are strengthened for the work. God's hand strengthens our hands.

His gracious hand upon us. Our strengthened hands before Him. That's the order. Grace first. Then work. God's provision. Then our participation. God's faithfulness. Then our obedience.

We don't strengthen our hands so that perhaps God will put His gracious hand upon us. His gracious hand has been upon us, therefore we strengthen our hands for the good work He has put before us.

4. RESISTANCE DOES NOT MEAN GOD HAS WITHDRAWN HIS HAND

Nehemiah 2:19–20

And just when everybody is ready to get started...Here they come again. Sanballat. Tobiah. And now they've picked up Geshem the Arab. The opposition is growing. Because it is disappointingly easy to grow antagonistic coalitions.

At the beginning of the passage they were displeased. Now they ridicule. They mock. And then they accuse. “What is this you're doing? Are you rebelling against the king?” Which is almost funny when you think about it.

Nehemiah literally has letters from the king authorizing the work. But facts don't necessarily stop opposition. Good intentions don't necessarily stop opposition. God's blessing doesn't necessarily stop opposition. And here's something we need to remember. Grace is not measured by the absence of resistance.

Now, we need to be careful with that. Because it would be very easy to turn this into, “*People are opposing me, therefore I must be doing God's will.*” No. Sometimes people oppose us because we're wrong. Sometimes criticism is correction we desperately need. Sometimes we're calling our own stubbornness “faithfulness.”

Nehemiah's confidence is not, “People oppose me, therefore I'm right.”

His confidence is, “God has called us to this. God has provided for this.” And this work is consistent with what God has revealed concerning His people and His purposes. That's very different.

And that's why Nehemiah can answer firmly, “The God of the heavens is the one who will grant us success. We, his servants, will start building.”

Notice where Nehemiah's confidence rests. Not Artaxerxes. That's interesting. He could have pulled out the king's letters. “*Would you gentlemen like to see the paperwork?*” But that's not his ultimate confidence. “The God of the heavens is the one who will grant us success.”

The king may have opened the political door. But Nehemiah knows who opened the king's heart. His confidence is in God.

And then he establishes a boundary, “But you have no share, right, or historic claim in Jerusalem.” There is background to this in Ezra 4. Previous generations of returnees had already faced attempts at involvement from those whose religious claims and practices threatened the covenant faithfulness of God's people.

Nehemiah isn't being petty. He isn't looking for enemies. But neither is he naive. And that's important. Christian love does not require naivety. We don't have to hate people who oppose us. We don't have to retaliate. We don't have to demonize people. We don't have to become like our enemies in order to respond to them.

But loving people doesn't mean giving everyone influence over the work God has entrusted to us. There are people you can love whom you should not allow to determine your obedience.

Jesus loved people who rejected Him. Paul prayed for people who opposed him. The early church blessed those who persecuted them. But none of them surrendered obedience to God in order to satisfy their opponents. Nehemiah won't either. “The God of the heavens is the one who will grant us success. We, his servants, will start building.”

WHEN GRACE MEETS RESISTANCE

Last week we ended with a stone. Pick up the stone. Get to work.

And maybe you did. You took the step. You had the conversation. You started addressing something you've spent years stepping around. You began doing what God had put before you.

And then...It got harder. Somebody misunderstood. Somebody criticized. Somebody didn't respond the way you hoped. Something didn't go according to plan. The problem was bigger than you realized. And maybe somewhere along the way you began wondering, "Did I misunderstand God?"

Nehemiah reminds us that resistance is not necessarily evidence that you took the wrong road. Look at the two realities sitting beside each other in this chapter. The gracious hand of God was upon Nehemiah. And Sanballat was angry. Both were true.

God had opened the door and opposition was waiting. God had provided and the wall was still a mess. God had called and Nehemiah still had to persevere. So don't measure God's faithfulness by how easy the work becomes. That's not how Nehemiah measures it. He looks instead for the gracious hand of God.

And perhaps that's what some of us need to do. Look backward. Remember His faithfulness. Remember the prayers He has answered. Remember the doors He has opened. Remember the grace that brought you this far. And then look at the work before you.

Maybe there is still rubble. Maybe somebody isn't happy that you've stopped stepping around the broken step. Maybe obedience has turned out to be harder than you imagined. Maybe you're tired. But the presence of resistance does not mean the absence of grace.

And ultimately, we know that because we look beyond Nehemiah. We look to Jesus. No one ever walked more perfectly in the will of the Father. No one ever did more good. No one ever loved more purely. No one ever obeyed more faithfully. And no one ever encountered greater opposition.

The cross forever destroys the idea that resistance means God must have abandoned His purposes. At the cross, what looked like defeat became the means of our redemption.

And on the third day, the stone was rolled away. Our confidence isn't that faithful obedience will make the road easy. Our confidence is that the crucified and risen Christ is Lord. His grace is sufficient. His purposes will stand. And His gracious hand remains upon His people.

When grace meets resistance, look carefully at the work before you. Remember the grace behind you. Trust the God above you. And strengthen your hands for the good work He has given you.

His gracious hand upon us. Our strengthened hands before Him. And by His grace, we continue with the work before us.