



Rebuilding the Wall

THEOLOGICAL THEME: God is glorified not only in our fulfillment of a task but also in the way we fulfill that task.

How should Christians respond when they find themselves in situations that call for acts of faith that seem impossible in light of their circumstances? This section of Nehemiah reminds us of the priority of prayer and the responsibility of wise action.



How do you determine what course of action is wisest when you are faced with a difficult choice?

Voices from the Church

“Wisdom is the power to see, and the inclination to choose, the best and highest goal, together with the surest means of attaining it.”¹

—J. I. Packer

The Book of Nehemiah is the story of God restoring His people in the promised land and their reorganization as His covenant people. As we continue Nehemiah’s story, we see that God’s people are faced with conflict from the outside and inside. However, because they persevere in repentance and faith, they accomplish God’s will in spite of their circumstances. From Nehemiah we learn that God calls us to do the right thing in the right way and then give Him glory for success. We also learn that God is glorified not only in our fulfillment of a task but also in the way we fulfill that task.

Date of My Bible Study: _____

1. God's people act wisely in the face of conflict (Neh. 4:7-14).



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. ⁹ And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night.

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.” ¹¹ And our enemies said, “They will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work.” 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.” 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. 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.”

The primary reason that Sanballat and his associates were so adamant about stopping this work is revealed in their agenda. While Nehemiah was seeking the good of God's people, Sanballat and his associates were seeking their own good at the expense of God's people. Once the walls were built and God's people could begin living under His law with one another, it would be very hard for the enemies of God to exploit His people.

The intentions of God's enemies should be familiar to each of us, if we are honest. The natural orientation of the human heart centers on self. "What's best for me" is the natural inclination of the human heart when faced with a decision or a circumstance. By nature, humans are more filled with self-interest than with love and concern for others. For this reason God gave us the law, which Jesus summarized, in part, in the command to love others with the same energy and attention that you would show yourself (Matt. 22:39). While it's easy to cast the first stone at Sanballat and his associates, perhaps we should reflect on our own hearts.

The good news is that while the enemies of God's people plotted together to stop their task (Neh. 4:8), God's people stood confident in the face of conflict. The Jews armed themselves with prayer (vv. 4-5,9) and persevered in obedience (vv. 6,9,15-23). In the face of opposition, God's people guarded one another and continued building the wall (vv. 6,9).

 What examples of wisdom do you see in the response of Nehemiah to the opposition he faced?

 What would have been an unwise response?

As we have seen before, Nehemiah prayed in the face of an improbable situation and also took wise action (see 2:4). The danger of such action is elaborated on in verses 9-12. Not only was the task bigger than what the feeble Jews could accomplish on their own, but their enemies threatened them with the horror of deadly attacks under the cover of night. Even more, their friends and families came from the villages to plead with them to come home and quit in the face of certain danger.

However, Nehemiah was sure of God's protection and provision in this task. He called the people not to be afraid, to remember the Lord's awesome character, and to fight for sake of their families and their homes (4:14). As we see in 4:20, Nehemiah's trust was founded on his knowledge of the God who fights for His people, just as He had done in generations past (see Ex. 14:14; Deut. 1:30).

We must not forget that like the Jews in the face of Sanballat, Tobiah, and the Arabs, Ammonites, and Ashdodites, God's Son faced certain opposition.

In fact, the Scriptures remind us that Jesus was also despised and rejected by men (Isa. 53:3; 1 Pet. 2:23). Like Nehemiah and the Jews, Jesus remained steadfast and obedient, even through death (Phil. 2:8). And Jesus was victorious (1 Cor. 15:55-57). As we reflect on the gospel, we are reminded that God has fought for us in Christ. We are called to battle on even as we are despised and rejected, remembering our great and awe-inspiring God.



Fear is a strong force that often keeps us from fulfilling God's will for our lives. What are some specific ways that we, the people of God, can fight fear with faith?



Voices from Church History

"If my attitude be one of fear, not faith, about the one who has disappointed me; if I say 'Just what I expected,' if a fall occurs, then I know nothing of Calvary love."²

—Amy Carmichael
(1867-1951)

2. God's people address social injustice (Neh. 5:1-13).

¹ Now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers. ² For there were those who said, "With our sons and our daughters, we are many. So let us get grain, that we may eat and keep alive." ³ There were also those who said, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses to get grain because of the famine." ⁴ And there were those who said, "We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields and our vineyards. ⁵ Now our flesh is as the flesh of our brothers, our children are as their children. Yet we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves,

and some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but it is not in our power to help it, for other men have our fields and our vineyards.”

⁶ I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words. ⁷ I took counsel with myself, and I brought charges against the nobles and the officials. I said to them, “You are exacting interest, each from his brother.” And I held a great assembly against them ⁸ and said to them, “We, as far as we are able, have bought back our Jewish brothers who have been sold to the nations, but you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us!” They were silent and could not find a word to say. ⁹ So I said, “The thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies? ¹⁰ Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us abandon this exacting of interest. ¹¹ Return to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the percentage of money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them.” ¹² Then they said, “We will restore these and require nothing from them. We will do as you say.” And I called the priests and made them swear to do as they had promised. ¹³ I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, “So may God shake out every man from his house and from his labor who does not keep this promise. So may he be shaken out and emptied.” And all the assembly said “Amen” and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised.

While God’s people focused on the work of the wall, it seems that they had neglected their fields (5:2). In light of this neglect, they hired others to work their fields in exchange for grain (v. 3). Moreover, while there was famine because of the neglect, the king did not suspend the taxes they owed (v. 4). Because of this situation, God’s people were selling their vulnerable children into debt-slavery (v. 5). As a result, God’s people neglected the poor and compromised their ability to provide for themselves.



Why is it important that we keep a close watch on our own lives as we seek to be obedient to the will and commands of God?

Nehemiah became angry, and rightly so. Not only had they placed their children and the poor in a terrible position, they were also charging interest against one another (5:6-8). Jews charging other Jews interest was strictly forbidden in the law of Moses (Ex. 22:12-27; Lev. 25:35-54; Deut. 23:19-20). So Nehemiah pleaded with the people to open their eyes and see what they had done (Neh. 5:9).

One of the things that God's people often fail to recognize is that threats to God's work do not always come from the outside; they often arise from the inside. In this passage we are reminded that ignoring God's commands in our lives can have serious implications against the task that is set before us.

The good news is when Nehemiah confronted their sin, they repented and sought to right their wrongs (vv. 12-13). In the same way, we must remember that the good news of the gospel is not just for our initial salvation but for our ongoing sanctification. The gospel rescues me from me—all of me. This is why repentance is central to the Christian life. Just as the Jews declared “Amen” to Nehemiah's convicting call (v. 13), so should we when confronted with the searching Word of God. We should also praise the Lord when abiding sin is revealed in our own lives because God's grace awakens us to it so we can repent and obey.

99 Essential Christian Doctrines

90. *Social Concern*

All Christians are under obligation to seek to make the will of Christ supreme in our own lives and in human society. Means and methods used for the improvement of society and the establishment of righteousness among men can be truly and permanently helpful only when they are rooted in the regeneration of the individual by the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ. In the Spirit of Christ, Christians should oppose racism, every form of greed, selfishness, vice, and all forms of sexual immorality, including adultery, homosexuality, and pornography. We should work to provide for the orphaned, the needy, the abused, the aged, the helpless, and the sick. We should speak on behalf of the unborn and contend for the sanctity of all human life from conception to natural death. Every Christian should seek to bring industry, government, and society as a whole under the sway of the principles of righteousness, truth, and brotherly love. In order to promote these ends, Christians should be ready to work with all men of good will in any good cause, always being careful to act in the spirit of love without compromising their loyalty to Christ and His truth (Mic. 6:8; Eph. 6:5-9; 1 Thess. 3:12).



When we are confronted with our own shortfalls and sins, there are two responses: to repent and obey or to resist God's conviction. How does the gospel empower our repentance and our response of obedience?

3. God's people give glory to God for success (Neh. 6:15-16).

¹⁵ So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. ¹⁶ And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem, for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.



When have you seen God do something so amazing that upon reflection you realized only God could have done it? What were the circumstances?

Christian history is full of examples of God's people triumphing despite their inability and the circumstances in which they found themselves (consider Moses before Pharaoh; the reformers before the Catholic Church; the growing church in communist China). The church itself is an example of God's triumph despite the frequent failures of God's people and the opposition from the societies and cultures that they inhabit.

It's important to remember that God has a purpose in all that He does. There are no random acts that come from the hand of the sovereign God of redemptive history. During the time of Nehemiah, God was restoring His people in the promised land and reorganizing them as His covenant people. God is working just the same in our day.



What is the danger of failing to give God glory for success?

Conclusion

As we look forward, we realize that this story is meant to give us a picture of what is to come. Cyrus' decree allowed the Jews to rebuild "the house of God" (Ezra 5:13; 6:3). Rebuilding the house involved the restoration of the people, not just walls, a city, and a temple. In other words, the house of God included the entire city—with its surrounding walls and central temple and the people themselves.



Voices from Church History

"Social action is a *partner of evangelism...* Both are expressions of unfeigned love."³

—John Stott (1921-2011)

Here God is giving us a picture of the New Jerusalem, the holy city that will come down out of heaven from God (Rev. 21:2). God's people will one day be gathered within this city's walls, and in it God will make His dwelling with humanity. In that day they will be delivered from all their enemies and ruled over by King Jesus, the promised descendant from the royal Davidic line, sitting on His eternal throne.

CHRIST CONNECTION: In Nehemiah's day, the people joined together to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem and protect the city from their enemies. Jesus later prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem, but through His death and resurrection, He made a way for His people to be protected from the enemies of sin and death.

HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: God calls us to do the right thing in the right way and then give Him glory for success.

1. What are some circumstances in our community and culture in which we must be especially careful to act wisely for the sake of the gospel, and how should we do so?

2. What actions can our group/church take to address a situation of social injustice in our community and be a light for Jesus in the process?

3. How does our praise of God aid us in our witness to the world?
