

## A Pivotal Moment - Nehemiah 6:15-7:73

### Scripture Reading: Nehemiah 6:15-7:4

#### Introduction

As you have probably already discerned, this morning we have come to a pivotal moment in the book of Nehemiah. I named this sermon series “Rebuilding a Wall; Restoring a People” and as we’ve just heard in our Scripture reading in verse 15 “So the wall was finished...”

The first and express purpose for Nehemiah having been sent to Jerusalem by Artaxerxes has been completed but Nehemiah finds that the work God wants him to complete there is far from over.

In their song, Breathe, the rock band Pink Floyd sings:

Run rabbit run, dig that hole; forget the sun.

And when at last the work is done, don’t sit down it’s time to dig another one.

I have to wonder if Nehemiah might not have felt that way when, having completed the rather Herculean task of rebuilding the wall in record time, God laid it on his heart that he still had what would prove to be even larger task on his plate – guiding the restoration of the people of Jerusalem.

You have probably already noted that we are taking on a huge chunk of Scripture this morning and if you have read ahead you will see that the majority – in fact most of chapter 7 – is taken up with a list of names.

And, you may well be wondering what you are in for this morning.

So let me put your fears to rest – we won’t be going through that list of names in a thorough manner but will be looking at what God has to tell us in the fact that Nehemiah took the time to give the list attention as the wall was completed.

Without further ado, let’s dig into our study with our Roman numeral one – The Wall is Finished.

#### **I. The Wall is Finished**

Looking back at Nehemiah 2:1 we see that Nehemiah’s journey to take on the task of rebuilding the wall had its beginning in the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes.

Nisan in the Hebrew calendar translates to the period of mid-March to mid-April on our calendar.

Now, in verse 15 of chapter 6 (Neh. 6:15) we read that the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth day of the month of Elul which would be equivalent to mid-August to mid-September on our calendar.

That tells us that roughly six months have passed in our narrative since Nehemiah told Artaxerxes the reason for his sadness and received orders to go and restore the wall.

You will remember that Nehemiah’s first task when he arrived in Jerusalem was to make a secret, nighttime inspection of the wall and the intervening months have been filled with planning, strategizing, recruiting, motivating, and a great deal of time was spent in simply defending against opposition both from within and without Jerusalem.

Nehemiah has been a very busy man but the wall has now been completed and the major obstacle to removing the shame of God’s judgment of exile has been removed.

I want you to take note of **three things** concerning the completion of the wall.

**First**, the work on the wall was accomplished in a very short amount of time in the face of opposition on the part of Nehemiah’s enemies.

An elderly woman who was never known to have uttered an unkind word against anyone in her life was challenged by a friend who said, “I’ll bet you could find something good to say about the devil himself!” to which the old gal replied, “Well, you have to admire his persistence.”

And Satan was persistent in trying to stop the reconstruction efforts as he repeatedly deployed his usual bag of tricks to cause disruption and fear among the people – often through his trio of henchmen Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem. The project that Nehemiah oversaw was a troubled one from start to finish but it was ultimately completed to serve as a triumph of good over evil.

You've probably heard the old military expression that says "You take the most flak when you are directly over the target" and folks I've seen that to be true in the church.

Satan cannot abide any kingdom progress because every inch gained by the people of God diminishes Satan's domain. So he will use every weapon in his arsenal to attack and try to halt or undo every attempt and every step of progress for the kingdom that God's people make whether it is in our personal, spiritual lives or in reaching others.

It seems that whenever spiritual progress is being made, Satan attacks and often from many directions all at once and, even though his attacks do indeed hurt, believers should rejoice in them because it shows them they are likely on the right track and they should only let them serve to cause them to bolster their defenses and redouble their efforts because – as we see in the case of Nehemiah – doing so leads to victory.

The **second** thing I want you to be sure to note is that Nehemiah's enemies recognized the truth of God's providence. Look with me at the last part of verse 16 (Neh. 6:16c) "*...they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.*"

As we have seen in our previous studies, the wall was most definitely reconstructed by human hands under often difficult conditions – it would not have been completed had the people shirked the work.

But at the same time, we must also understand that it was ultimately God who built the wall.

The language of providence can be a bit strange and difficult for us to grasp but we need to make the effort to understand how God most often works in the world to accomplish his deeds through the efforts of his people.

God does sometimes work directly to accomplish his will by performing miracles but he most often chooses to work indirectly through his agents – his people and even the laws of nature themselves – to accomplish his will in the world.

So we can rightly say that the men and women of Jerusalem rebuilt the wall while at the same time, God rebuilt the wall.

In a very real sense, everything that happens is because of God's sovereignty because we know that God gives us what we need to even attempt things let alone be successful but there are times when we recognize God's hand in a very special way.

That might be because the task before us seemed impossible but was accomplished with ease or because of a result that truly surprised us beyond our expectations or the significance of an occurrence.

And that seems to be what happened here – Nehemiah's enemies had to acknowledge that God had truly been with the Judeans as they completed the wall because they were certain they could have stopped the Judeans alone – after all, they had done so before.

But the lesson we need to take from this and apply to our own lives is that God has a work to do in our corner of the world and we have a part in it that we must fulfill if that work is to bear fruit.

God wants to work in us and through us and his provision is available to us as we labor for him and he will empower and bless our efforts leading us to success as we labor – but we can't just sit back and watch God work because that's not how God works.

It's not that God can't succeed without us but that he *chooses* to succeed through us and that is a true blessing as we get to partner with God and show the world what God can do.

And that brings us to the **third** thing I want you to note – the complete reversal of affairs that occurred when the wall was completed

Nehemiah’s enemies had tried all manner of tactics to make the people of Jerusalem afraid but now it was they who were filled with fear

Our text says (Neh. 6:16b) when they heard the wall was completed *“all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem”*

When the last gate was hung the balloon burst for Nehemiah’s enemies – they were truly deflated and filled with fear as they recognized that God was indeed with the Judeans

There isn’t anything to indicate that their fear resulted in even one person becoming a follower of God let alone that some sort of mass revival occurred among the nations surrounding Jerusalem

But they did notice that, in spite of their persecutions, Nehemiah and the people had successfully kept on task and, with God’s divine assistance, had prevailed with the result being fear and demoralization

I have to believe that Nehemiah’s handling of pain and rejection and opposition was what brought about a sense of God’s power and superiority in his enemies

Likewise, how we handle the inevitable downturns and setbacks and even attacks of life says much to a watching world We should never panic as the world does or lose hope and confidence because we know who we serve and we know of his might

We can look to verses like **Romans 8:28** and know that in whatever the world throws at us God is working for his purposes, his glory, and our ultimate good

I’m put in mind of Jim Van Dreser’s Sunday School class as they are going through the book of Philippians and how Paul, when he was sitting in a Roman prison chained between two guards 24 hours a day, was able to say that his imprisonment had opened a mission field to him among the imperial guard so that they were hearing the gospel

Imagine the testimony that Paul displayed when he recognized the opportunity that his misfortune had brought

Paul didn’t rail against injustice or pout and stew over his imprisonment – he witnessed in conduct and word and people in Caesar’s household were saved

That’s the attitude we need to present to a watching world in times of trouble – a sure confidence that God is still on his throne as we continue to labor and to take advantage of the situation we’re in with equilibrium and calm

Because, when people notice the difference, God ultimately receives the glory and we just might reach some of them to introduce them to our Savior

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of the wall around Jerusalem and the elation and celebratory atmosphere that surely existed when the last door was hung

But, as we will see next, all still wasn’t well even among the people of Judea and the opposition to Nehemiah persisted even in the face of victory

## **II. The Opposition Persisted**

We aren’t overly surprised to read that the opposition centers around Nehemiah’s nemesis, Tobiah once again

As we’ve said, Satan is persistent but he isn’t always terribly original in his attacks and they tend to follow familiar patterns

Tobiah we know was the governor of Ammon and that he was a grasping politician who was trying to maintain his power through opposing Nehemiah

Now, in the verses before us, we learn that he was also connected through family and business ties to the rich, important folks in and around Jerusalem

We see his family ties spelled out for us in verse 18 (Neh. 6:18) – *he was the son-in-law of Shecaniah the son of Arah: and his son Jehohanan had taken the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah as his wife*

Without digging into the pedigrees of all those folks, let's just say that Tobiah was well-connected to Jerusalem high-society and, as we all know, family is family and Nehemiah's criticisms of Tobiah had not been well received among the powerful which, of course, sowed the seeds of further internal strife

It also seems from verse 18 (Neh. 6:18) that Tobiah was deeply involved in business dealings with the local businessmen That seems to be the clear meaning of the phrase "*many in Judah were bound by oath to him*"

That meant that Nehemiah's negative relationship with Tobiah threatened both family connections and their wealth – and that's not exactly a recipe for harmony

Unfortunately, the elite allowed their family ties and monetary concerns to blind them, or at least to numb them, to the fact that Tobiah, in opposing Nehemiah, was actually opposing God's work

And they were all too willing to consort with a known and as yet unrepentant enemy for the sake of family and finances So they started a whisper campaign of sorts that was pro-Tobiah and anti-Nehemiah hoping to further damage Nehemiah's reputation and effectiveness as they sought to instill a distrust of Nehemiah by calling into question his judgment and motives

So that once more Nehemiah is faced with a test of his leadership

Before we look at how Nehemiah responded to this latest tactic we want to notice that we are still vulnerable to these same kinds of misguided loyalty today

Of course we always must deal with the fact of family ties and blood being thicker than water, as they say, and there are times when our loyalty to our family can certainly cause us problems when we allow it to trump God's Word

But the idea that business is business and the allure of financial gain also makes many a Christ-follower do things they might not otherwise do as the love of money makes us forget our ethical obligations and responsibilities

In his earthly ministry Jesus took great pains to often point out the danger of allowing material concerns to get in the way of doing what is right and the snare that money can be

We must be on guard against anything – no matter how noble or seemingly disassociated from spiritual matters it may be – that can cause us to go astray from the ethical and moral principles we find in Scripture leading to bad judgments and actions

In the end, the whisper campaign began to have an effect as seeds of mistrust were sown and Nehemiah's leadership began to be called into question even as he was calling on the people to spiritual reliance on God's Word

And it's an age-old tactic that is still employed successfully today - if you can't attack the principle, attack the man behind it

Personal attacks of this nature have repeatedly been effective in many churches as people who don't like the direction the church is headed attack the pastor and sling mud knowing that, eventually, some of it will stick whether or not it is valid

It can be hard to not become cynical when those types of attacks come a person's way but Nehemiah shows us how to handle them successfully in what he did when the attacks came against him and he does **three very important things**

**First**, he keeps moving forward

In fact, his response to the negative whisper campaign was to redouble his efforts at reform in the city. Completing the wall, as crucially important as it was, was only a prelude to the real work of establishing a community in which faith was alive and real.

God's goal in Jerusalem has always been the restored spiritual life of the community and the state of the hearts of the people – it had always been about a restored people engaging in godly worship.

And it seems that Nehemiah saw this clearly as having finished the wall he turned his attention to reforming the spiritual life of the community.

But the reality before him was that even though the wall was finished life within the wall was a mess.

The city was sparsely populated, economically depressed, and those who did live within the wall weren't living well as we see in verse 4 of chapter 7 (Neh. 7:4).

*The city was wide and large, but the people within it were few, and no houses had been rebuilt.*

Many who lived outside the walls had come to assist in the rebuilding but had now returned to their homes in the surrounding rural area leaving the city of Jerusalem rather empty as it has been estimated that less than 10% of the population actually lived within the city walls.

And it's not difficult to see that because of that, even with the wall, Jerusalem was still very weak and Nehemiah needed to repopulate the city.

So the **second** thing we see Nehemiah do is he set gatekeepers on guard duty at the new city gates with specific instructions as to how to manage the gates – when to open the gates and when to keep them closed.

And it's interesting that he chose the temple guard, the Levites, and the temple singers to be the guards.

In addition to serving to show just how seriously Nehemiah felt the threat of attack, using those who were typically assigned to temple duty showed that he viewed the entire city and not just the temple itself as God's dwelling place.

We see Jeremiah prophesy that very thing in Jeremiah 31:38-40 which says:

*"Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when the city shall be rebuilt for the Lord from the Tower of Hananel to the Corner Gate. And the measuring line shall go out farther, straight to the hill Gareb, and shall then turn to Goah. The whole valley of the dead bodies and the ashes, and all the fields as far as the brook Kidron, to the corner of the Horse Gate toward the east, shall be sacred to the Lord. It shall not be plucked up or overthrown anymore forever."*

The **third** thing Nehemiah did reveals him once again as a gifted leader.

He took some of the burden of oversight off of his shoulders and set up other leaders to handle the day-to-day administration of the local government.

No leader can do everything and those who try often burn brightly for a while before burning out completely.

And the mark of a good leader is the ability to select qualified leaders to whom to delegate responsibility.

In verse 2 (Neh. 7:2) we see the two qualities Nehemiah looked for as he designated his "middle-management team."

The first is **trustworthiness** or "faithfulness" as it is actually rendered in the ESV and the second characteristic was **reverence for God** or being "God-fearing" as we see it here.

Managing the city's defenses required men of practical insight and resourcefulness and dependability but even more important, even for a "captain of the guard" type position was godliness and Nehemiah found those characteristics in his brother Hanani and another man named Hananiah.

We should look to Nehemiah's example when we place people in positions of responsibility and leadership in the church and make godliness – a true, deep, and abiding respect for God – at the top of our list of qualifications rather than education or skill or looks or some other things that churches tend to value today.

Of course, trustworthiness and the ability to do the job at hand are necessary as we see in Nehemiah's selection, but a healthy respect for God is paramount and should be at the top of our list of qualifications for any position in the church.

As I was studying this passage I wondered if Nehemiah was starting to plan his departure and return to the court of Artaxerxes

After all, he had been commissioned to go and rebuild the wall and that task was completed so it would seem only natural that he would be making moves to return

And I wondered if the thought of leaving Jerusalem in the sorry state it was still in was bothering him more than just a little bit

After all, it was his burden for the city that brought him here in the first place

And I wondered if he was a bit surprised by God's revelation to him in verse 5 that his work there was not over after all and that the work would need to continue

### **III. The Work Continued**

Look with me at verse 5 (Neh. 7:5)

*Then my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles and the officials and the people to be enrolled by genealogy.*

That one sentence reveals a couple of very interesting things about Nehemiah

**First**, Nehemiah had a personal relationship with God – God was “my God” to Nehemiah in the sense that he had an ongoing, personal relationship with the Lord

Nehemiah knew God in a personal way and could confidently use the personal possessive pronoun “my” to describe their relationship just as King David and other biblical writers do throughout Scripture

As we all know, it's nigh onto impossible to maintain a close, personal relationship without contact and time spent together

We could all tell stories of long-ago dear friends we thought would be friends for life who moved away or we moved away from them and how distance first strained and then ended the friendship – not in a negative way but just naturally

The same thing is true when it comes to having a relationship with God

If you want to have a vibrant, personal, meaningful relationship with God it is going to take work on your part to remain in God's Word to hear him speaking to you and a solid prayer life where you communicate with God

You may be saved and have a personal relationship with God in fact, but to have one like Nehemiah's that is real enough to make a difference in this life you need to keep close to God

That brings us to the **second** thing revealed here and that is that Nehemiah was sensitive to God's leading so that he discerned the Lord's prompting him in his heart

Notice that Nehemiah doesn't say that God commanded him directly to do what he did but that God “*put it in my heart*”

Lack of God's guidance is a common complaint among believers today and I believe that is largely because Christians today by and large don't spend enough time in the Word – they don't know what it says or how to apply it

God most often guides us through the use of direct moral principles of right and wrong or by godly examples that are both found in his Word; the Bible

When we spend time in reading and studying God's Word we are exposed to direct commands, good and bad examples, promises of God, knowledge about the nature of God, lessons to evaluate and warnings to heed

And then God uses that knowledge to inspire us to do the things that will bring him the most glory by using our own God-given intellect and powers of reason that are based on and informed by biblical knowledge

It's as we find in Romans 12:2 where Paul commands believers –

*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

That “renewal of mind” that Paul is talking about there comes from the study of God’s Word and beginning to think God’s thoughts and when we make that our way of life, God speaks to us and directs us accordingly so that we make good, godly decisions for his glory – like Nehemiah

Now, let me hasten to say that we still need to test the spirits as it were and check all our subjective feelings of God’s leading against his Word and maybe even inquire of other mature believers just to be sure we aren’t engaging in personal desire fulfillment but more often than not, I believe that the more we’re in God’s Word the clearer God’s will is going to be

I want to just quickly touch on the census or genealogy that God laid it on Nehemiah’s heart to read and record here. What we have in this list of names is also found virtually identically in Ezra 2:1-70 and it is a listing of those who had returned to Jerusalem some 90 years earlier under the leadership of Zerubbabel in 538 B.C.

We might well wonder at the significance of such an old list since all but the very, very young had certainly passed on by this time

For Nehemiah, I believe it was a call to national identity and pride because Jerusalem needed to be repopulated but only by the true people of God and Nehemiah was reinforcing that idea

The value for us I believe is in seeing the value of the unbroken continuation of God’s people

We know that all Scripture is breathed out by God and is profitable for us – and that includes this list of what to us are obscure names – and even though we aren’t going to take the time to parse through the list it is important that we take from it what we can

It’s beneficial for us, as it was for the people of Nehemiah’s day, to recognize that God’s lineage stretches a long way back and for us to recognize our place in that long line of God-followers

The list also reveals that people matter to God and that includes families as well as individuals

It also tells us that our place in God’s family history matters to God as does our understanding and commitment to his purposes

## **Conclusion**

This morning we’ve seen that the completion of the wall didn’t end the opposition to Nehemiah and what God was doing through him

And we know all too well that we often face the same sorts of opposition that Nehemiah has faced all along

We live amongst unbelievers in a sort of Babylon and the reality is that this is their world and we are just passing through it

We will be tempted to do one of two things by our associations with the world around us – run away or give in to it and both of those are wrong responses

What we must do instead is continue to live godly lives of example as we manage all our relationships and behaviors by the Word of God

Because when we do that, and when we continue to do the work that God has given us to do, it will show and the world will have to take notice

In Nehemiah’s case that notice resulted in fear – we hope that in our case the notice will result in an opportunity to share the gospel

But either way, in the end, people will notice and testify that God is surely with us

Let’s pray