

Nehemiah 3-4

“Kingdom Work: Advance and Opposition”

Imago Dei Church

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome.

We’ve been studying the book of Nehemiah, and today we’re going to try to cover **2 chapters**. If this is your first week with us, Nehemiah is in the **OT**, which means it occurs **before the coming of Jesus Christ**.

In the OT, God has chosen the people of Israel to be **his special people**. And even though he showed **grace and mercy** and love to them, **they rebelled** against him.

So he sent them into exile for some time. But he did not abandon them.

The book of Nehemiah and the one right before it (Ezra), are about **God restoring his people**. And in the book of Nehemiah, God gives Nehemiah a **special burden to rebuild the walls** of the destroyed city of Jerusalem.

And when we get to chapters 3-4, the wall itself actually **starts getting rebuilt**.

These chapters **may be a bit confusing** to you (esp. ch. 3). It can read like a big **list of names and places**.

(ILL) Pastor Tony shared in our staff meeting this week about a Netflix documentary about how they caught the Unabomber. They used linguistic analysis of some rambling letters and manifestos the guy had written to catch him.

You might feel when you're reading chapter 3 that you are trying to catch the Unabomber—you gotta wade through all the names and find the special code.

But I have good news for you—I don't think you need to do that!

I think the best way to understand these chapters is to understand **why the wall is so important**.

'Why does it matter?'

'What does that have to do with me?'

'Am I supposed to go build a wall?'

'Is this for America?'

'Is this showing us that it's a biblical idea to try to keep foreigners out?'

No. This is not a book or a text about American refugee policy. The wall is not about America at all.

The wall is, however, **about the kingdom of God**.

More specifically, it's about God's faithfulness to his

promise to establish his worldwide kingdom through his covenant people, Israel.

That's what the whole book of Ezra-Nehemiah is focused on: **God's own faithfulness to his covenant, and his people's recommitment to that covenant.**

In these chapters, Nehemiah and the people have a holy ambition—they want **to rebuild the wall** around Jerusalem.

It had been destroyed, and they want to see it rebuilt. But their “holy ambition” to rebuild the wall is **not a simple desire to keep people out of Jerusalem or safe in Jerusalem.**

Rather, it's a desire to return to the covenant-keeping God. To work in his kingdom rather than against it.

And the wall shows something about God as well: it shows that God still **intends to keep his covenant** with his people. He is still with them.

The wall represents the fact that **God is still working through is covenant people to accomplish his purpose.**

We have been **unfaithful**, but he has **remained faithful**. We have abandoned the covenant; he has and will continue to keep it.

Now, in light of his faithfulness, let's get to work.

Big Idea: In light of God's faithfulness, we work for the advancement of God's kingdom, even in the face of fierce opposition.

And here's why that matters to you and me. If you're a Christian, **God did keep his covenant** with the people of Israel—it came to its fulfillment in the person and work of Jesus Christ. And now, **in Christ, you and I are graciously invited into the covenant people of God**, and we are **invited to get to work**.

Nehemiah's holy ambition was to see God advance his kingdom through his covenant people—that meant building a wall.

Our holy ambition is to see God advance his kingdom through his covenant people—that means we get to participate. We don't build walls or temples to advance his kingdom. Instead, we invite all people to know this covenant-keeping God through Jesus Christ.

That's our kingdom work, our holy ambition. **In our words and with our lives**—point people to this God and to his Christ.

So, **what do we learn in these chapters about doing kingdom work?** 2 primary things: (1) there will be advance, and (2) there will be opposition.

(1) ADVANCE**(3:1–32)**

Chapter 3 is organized geographically. It works its way around the edge of Jerusalem, showing how the wall was built **from Gate to Gate**. You'll notice when you read that there are seven gates mentioned in the text. And **between each gate, people build** the wall.

Without going through each verse, I want to point out **5 characteristics of "advance" in our kingdom work**. These are not so much promises as proverbs. They're generally true.

[i] KINGDOM ADVANCE HAPPENS WHEN EVERYONE WORKS.

Merchants, rulers, daughters, temple servants, guards, priests...even bachelors!

*Kingdom work is not for the elite few, but for the mobilized masses.

(APP) So many times, churches get this turned around ... The pastors don't do all the ministry. The people are supposed to do the ministry (cf. Eph. 4).

[ii] KINGDOM ADVANCE HAPPENS WHEN EVERYONE WORKS TOGETHER.

There's a unity to this effort. Everyone knows their job and does it.

[III] KINGDOM ADVANCE HAPPENS WHEN EVERYONE WORKS WISELY.

There's an organization to this effort. They're not doubling back or scrambling around. They're working efficiently and wisely.

(ILL) Ezra "playing water"

[IV] KINGDOM ADVANCE HAPPENS WHEN EVERYONE WORKS SACRIFICIALLY.

In a couple of instances, you see that people are building multiple sections of the wall. They're covering their part (e.g., across from their home) and another place.

See vv. 27, 30

[commendation]

[V] KINGDOM ADVANCE HAPPENS EVEN WHEN SOME DON'T WORK.

Notice in verse 5: "And next to them the Tekoites repaired, but their nobles would not stoop to serve their Lord."

There will always be some who consider the task, and the vision of the kingdom of God **does not stir them to labor.**

Their grasp of God's faithfulness is small, so **their ambition** is equally small.

(APP) What about you? **Will you stoop** to serve the Lord? **Will you consider the Lord Jesus**, who stooped to wash his disciples' feet, and then was hung from a cross on their behalf? **Will his mercy and grace motivate you to work**—not to earn his favor, but because you have been favored by him?

This is the gospel!

So the wall is under construction, and things are looking good. But sure enough, opposition is close at hand.

Let's look at the 4 phases of opposition they experience:

(2) OPPOSITION

(4:1–23)

[1] TAUNTS (4:1-6)

[Neh 4:1-3](#)

[1] Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews. [2] And he said in the presence of his brothers and of the army of Samaria, "What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore it for themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish up in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, and burned ones at that?" [3] Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, "Yes, what they are building—if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall!"

Their opponents do not take kindly to the (miraculous) progress they have made. **In chapter 2** they might have been amused or confused by

Nehemiah's plans. But **now they are upset**. They want to do something about it.

Their first tactic is to taunt them. It's a form of verbal abuse, meant to discourage and dissuade their efforts.

One commentator summarizes them like this:

“[Sanballat] **belittled their qualities** (*feeble Jews*), **derided their ambitions** (*Will the restore their walls?*), **mocked their optimism** (*Will they offer sacrifices? i.e., of thanksgiving and dedication when the wall is rebuilt*), **lamponed their enthusiasm** (*Will they finish it in a day?*), **undermined their confidence** (*Can they bring the stones back to life?*), and **magnified their problems** (*those heaps of rubble—burned as they are*).”

And then, his buddy Tobiah the Ammonite jumps in there and says, “Also, you’re **not doing a very good job**.” (a fox could topple this thing; v. 3)

(APP) Before we see Nehemiah's response, how would you respond? Self-justification? Fight back? Blame shift?

Nehemiah and the people respond how they have been responding, and how they will continue to do so: deep trust and diligent effort.

Neh 4:4-6

[4] Hear, O our God, for we are despised. Turn back their taunt on their own heads and give them up to be plundered in a land where they are captives. [5] Do not cover their guilt, and let not their sin be blotted out from your sight, **for they have provoked you to anger in the presence of the builders.**

[6] So we built the wall. And all the wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work.

His **deep trust** is expressed **through prayer**.

He prays for 3 things:

(1) Let their taunts turn back on them

(2) Let them experience what we've experienced

(3) Don't forgive them (that's one the covenant blessings, which they are mocking)

Why such a pointed and seemingly harsh prayer?

Not because they hurt his feelings, but because they are mocking God's faithfulness (4:5)

And that **deep trust** is followed by **diligent effort**: they get back to work, succeeding in building the wall all the way around, to half its height.

[II] PLOTS (4:7-9)

Neh 4:7-9

[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.

The taunts are followed by plots → actual plans to obstruct the progress of the wall.

They want to undermine the Jews' efforts **(i) by force** and **(ii) by inciting confusion/division** within their ranks (v.8)

(APP) There's more than one way to undermine kingdom work. One is to simply try to crush it. Another is to divide the people and undermine their trust in leadership, in God, and in one another.

We must be vigilant to protect against all of these!

Their response (v.9) is, again, twofold: **deep trust** and **diligent effort**. They pray and trust God, and they set a guard.

[III] DISCOURAGEMENT AND DISTRACTION (4:10-12)

[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."

The taunts and the plots are followed by **2 great enemies of kingdom work: discouragement and distraction** → we see 3 sources

(1) From within (v.10), the reality of the task was coming home to those who labored. It was going to be **hard**, and at times it **looked impossible**. Most importantly, they began to **lose sight of God's providential and sustaining hand**. They began to believe they were "by themselves"

(2) From their enemies (v.11) — tried to discourage them with overt threats. "We will stop you."

(3) From their friends (v.12) — Those Jews who had been scattered to the neighboring areas discouraged and distracted the work by trying to persuade the workers to give up. "**Look, I'm with you**. I'm on your side. But this is a fool's errand. Just come back and let's be faithful where the Lord placed us."

How do they respond?

Leads to the last phase:

[IV] PERSISTENCE (4:13-23)

They enemies have figured out that their plot has been uncovered, but that doesn't lead Nehemiah to relax. Not one bit.

You see again in this passage both **deep trust** and **diligent effort**.

(v.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."

deep trust =

v.20 – "our God will fight for us"

diligent effort =

Half working, half guarding (16)

Workers armed (17-18)

Sleep inside the walls (22)

Stayed dressed for battle (23)

CONCLUSION

Despite opposition, God showed himself faithful to his people.

He is the one who brings them out of exile.

He is the one who calls them to covenant faithfulness.

He is the one who fights for them and protects them.

He is always faithful.

And **in light of his faithfulness**, we are invited to live and work for his kingdom. That's what Nehemiah and his crew are doing. They're working in God's kingdom in light of God's faithfulness.

But they were not perfect. In fact, they never would be. Over and over again, the story of the OT tells us that God's people would not remain faithful to his covenant. They would constantly need to be called back to faithfulness.

The wall they built might be able to protect them from the opposition of neighboring peoples, but it could not protect them from the rebellion in their own hearts.

So **just as God fought for them** in the building of the wall, **God fought for them** in the keeping of the covenant. God would send **a faithful covenant-keeper**, his Son Jesus, who would live perfectly in relationship with him.

He would live the life of faithfulness that no Jew ever lived...the life you and I could never live.

And in Jesus we see that God is faithful not only to his side of the covenant, but to ours as well. He is **faithful on our behalf**.

(Unbeliever) If you're here and you don't know this God through the Jesus, your response **isn't to organize your**

life better or do more to be acceptable to him. It's to **look to the one who was faithful on your behalf, and trust him**. He can make you acceptable to this God.

(Believer) And if you're here and you are a Christian: **reflect** on the faithfulness of the covenant keeping God. He has fought for you. And, **in light of his faithfulness, let's get to work** advancing his kingdom.