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Let's Build: What Will It Take to Finish Well?

Investing my Time, Talent, and Treasure in God's Grand Plan Series

Nehemiah 4:1-6:16

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Here is a question this morning to test your honesty. (You wouldn't be dishonest in church, now, would you?) (*laughter*) How many of you have an unfinished project at home? If your hand is not up, you're not honest. (*laughter*) What is it about projects? You know, it's easy to get started—it looks like a really great thing; it needs to be done—but getting it finished, oh my goodness, sometimes it just seems like we'll never get those things finished. Sometimes it's a lack of motivation on our part; we just kind of lose interest over time. Sometimes it's a lack of time; you just don't seem to have the time to get at those things that are waiting. Sometimes we don't have the talent. We get into it and we realize: I just don't have what it takes to finish that. Sometimes we don't have the resources or the tools. In my case all of those things apply to a lot of the projects, but one of the things that is probably most frustrating is that often times my tools have gone missing. I have four adult children; two of them own their own houses and my tools are somewhere else. I don't know where they are. It's difficult to finish things. And certainly when we set out to build the kingdom of God here on earth, as we have been singing about and talking about over these last weeks, of bringing the flourishing of the kingdom of God here on earth through the gospel of grace, seeking to help people understand and know God and see their whole world restored and renewed through Jesus, that is a big, big project, and it requires absolutely everything we have. But what does it take to actually see this project of being a part of God's kingdom building all the way through to the finish?

That is what we want to talk about as we conclude our three weeks with Nehemiah who is serving as our example, our role model, in building *shalom* or *flourishing* here on earth. So we will pick the story up in chapter 4 and we are going to conclude today with this project being finished. We are going to see what he has to face and endure and the principle that will keep him on task to get this thing finished. In chapter 1, just to review, we saw that Nehemiah heard about the brokenness of Jerusalem, how its walls were torn down, how its people was absolutely miserable, and it moved him. It moved him deep in his soul. We see that his heart was in alignment with God's heart—that he had a heart for God and a heart for what mattered to God. This brokenness matters to God as the brokenness of *our* world matters to God. And it moved Nehemiah to prayer for an extended period of time. Because he seemed so far away from being able to do anything about it, he just simply fell on his face before God and asked God, "God, please fix the brokenness of this world." In the course of that praying God began to work in Nehemiah's heart; he began to offer himself as a potential partner with God in seeing this brokenness healed and restored. In chapters 2 and 3 last week we saw the fact that it took more than just prayer. It took planning and preparation because this was a monumental task. So Nehemiah went before God, but he also used his talent; he used his mind and he had to think through: what is it going to take to see this project through to completion? What resources am I going to need? How do we organize the people? There was a strategy and a plan. God, because He's a God of order and a God of planning, He wants us to plan and think about how we too can be involved in fixing the brokenness of our world. We don't do it haphazardly. We don't do it

on a wing and a prayer. We plan; we prepare; we're organized; we do it with excellence, because it matters to God how this project is done.

So now we left him last week with all of the people engaged. He rallied everyone to this grand project of rebuilding Jerusalem, and with everybody involved and engaged, it's just going to be smooth sailing, right? Wrong! In chapter 4, verse 1, we begin to see what will unfold over these next two and half chapters. It's wave after wave after wave of trouble. Actually, it's opposition of forces that came to bear against this project that absolutely could have overwhelmed it and stopped it dead in its tracks. But the principle that guided Nehemiah's life saw him through every single one of these things. I use the word *wave* because if you've ever been to the ocean when the surf is pounding, you know when you are trying to walk in that and a wave hits you and knocks you down and you just sort of struggle back to your feet when the next wave hits you and you struggle back to your feet. Then here comes the next wave and there's this relentless nature of waves that just keep coming and coming and coming, and that's exactly what we see in this Nehemiah story and exactly what it feels like for us sometimes, as we seek to be about building God's kingdom. In Chapter 4, verse 1 we see the beginning of the first wave:

> **Now it came about when Sanballet...**a name we have heard before...**heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became furious and very angry and mocked the Jews. And he spoke in the presence of his brothers and the wealthy *men* of Samaria and said, "What are these feeble Jews doing? Are they going to restore *it* for themselves? Can they offer sacrifices? Can they finish in a day? Can they revive the stones from the dusty rubble even the burned ones?" Now Tobiah the Ammonite was near him and he said, "Even what they are building—if a fox should jump on *it*, he would break their stone wall down!"** (*NASB, Nehemiah 4:1-3)

So what happens here is there's an attempt to discourage and disrupt the work from outside enemies, outside forces. And the first thing they do is mock and taunt the people. They make fun of them. "What do you think you are doing? There's no way you can accomplish this. Even if you could build the wall, the slightest little thing that would jump on it would make it come crashing down." This was just mockery and making fun of these people relentlessly, and you can sense there's this growing group of opposition who get on board with each other. One guy starts to mock and the next guy pitches in and pretty soon there is a whole group of people who are literally taunting and mocking the people as they do the work. What was Nehemiah's response to that in verse 4?

> **Hear O our God, how we are despised! Return their reproach on their own heads and give them up for plunder in a land of captivity. Do not forgive their iniquity and let not their sin be blotted out before Thee, for they have demoralized the builders.**
>
> (Vs. 4-5)

Nehemiah again in this case, with these taunts, just literally goes to God in prayer, and says, "God, I am going to give those guys to you." Now it isn't exactly a prayer of grace that he prays for them. He says, "God, return the trouble back on their own heads. I mean give them what they are trying to give us. But I am going to leave them in your hands. I am not going to get all caught up in this; we are going to keep going." And verse 6 says just that. In spite of being mocked, made fun of, it says:

So we built the wall and the whole wall was joined together to half its *height,* for the people had a mind to work.

Nehemiah's prayer was answered. God gave them a persevering spirit to continue on in spite of the fact that every day there were people standing around yelling insults and mocking them for what they were trying to do. Now I don't know if you experience that in your own life, but I would say there is a sense in the broader kingdom of God there are a lot of people who are outside and look at God's people and consistently make fun of us for what we believe, for what we stand for, for who we are. It's not uncommon that if you read the words of people who are really opposed to God's plan and to Jesus, that mockery and making fun and taunting, making you feel really stupid for believing what we believe is part of the strategy. And we can't let it stop us or discourage us. They are going to ratchet it up. Verse 7:

Now it came about when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites heard that the repair of the walls of Jerusalem went on, *and* that the breaches began to be closed, they were very angry.

We see the same thing. Now it's just a sense that there are more enemies. There are more people who are going to come against this because it's succeeding; it's actually working. So all of them conspired together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause a disturbance in it. Verse 11:

And our enemies said, "They will not know or see until we come among them, kill them and put a stop to the work." And it came about when the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times, "They will come up against us from every place where you may turn..." (Vs. 11-12)

So there is this growing sense of the literal, physical threats to the people who are on this project. They are going to stop at nothing to see this project stopped and there are more and more enemies gathering, and now they threaten the entire group with physical harm. They are going to try to attack and kill them, and this was having a demoralizing effect on these people. Again and again the people came to Nehemiah and said, "Hey, they are going to attack...they're going to attack...they're going to attack!" Nehemiah sensed their fear and in verse 10 records the chant, or poem they were saying as they were trying to rebuild:

Thus in Judah it was said,
"The strength of the burden bearers is failing,
Yet there is much rubbish;
And we ourselves are unable to rebuild the wall."

They were convincing themselves that this wasn't going to work because of this imminent threat against their lives. Well, we are not going to be able to read all of what follows, but what happens is that Nehemiah puts a plan in place, a plan of protection. He takes these threats seriously and he creates an entire environment where the people will be prepared if an attack actually happens. Verse 13:

Then I stationed *men* in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, the exposed places, and I stationed the people in families with their swords, spears, and bows. When I saw *their fear,* I rose and spoke to the nobles, the officials, and 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 houses."

When our enemies heard that it was known to us, and that God had frustrated their plan, then all of us returned to the wall, each one to his work. (Vs. 13-15)

Nehemiah saw their fear; he came up with a plan to protect them, and they continued to carry on the work. And from that day forward as we see at the end of chapter 4, verses16-23, there was a daily regimen of half of the people holding spears to protect and half of the people working; they worked in shifts. There was an entire system that Nehemiah created, and if there was a point of attack, the trumpet would sound; the people would rally; they were prepared and ready to defend themselves. This was the nature of this outside attack—outside enemies who were seeking to stop the project.

Now we are reminded in this that we too, as the people of God and the kingdom of God, have enemies. We as people, as Christians and followers of Christ in America, have not experienced over the centuries what people in other parts of the world experience—the cost of following Christ. There are many martyrs; there are many people who are physically threatened beyond just being taunted and mocked for their beliefs and their faith, and the reality is that it may become something that we have to deal with more and more in our own culture. It should not catch us by surprise. As Peter said, "Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal you are going through," because as we go about doing God's work, as we go about building His kingdom, people who have the kingdom of darkness—Satan and his forces using people often—will do everything in their power to stop this rebuilding. They don't want people to be redeemed and restored. Satan wants people to live in misery and self-destruction, so don't be surprised that we're opposed. It doesn't make sense to us. We think we are doing really good things in a really nice way. We're being gentle, gracious, kind, and we're serving the community. We just want people to know Jesus. Why the venom...why the anger...why the threats? It doesn't make sense to us, but we're in a spiritual battle and we shouldn't be surprised or caught off guard by the nature of the attacks that may come in many different forms from the outside.

So Nehemiah faced wave after wave of external attacks. But that wasn't just half of it. Now he's got all kinds of internal turmoil that he has to deal with and that's the subject of chapter 5:

Now there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers. For there were those who said, "We, our sons and our daughters, are many; therefore, let us get grain that we may eat and live." (There is a shortage of food among the people in this broken-down city.) **And there were others who said, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses that we might get grain because of the famine." There were also those who said, "We have borrowed money for the king's tax *on* our fields and our vineyards. Now our flesh is like the flesh of our brothers, our children like their children. Yet behold, we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters are forced into bondage *already*,** (implying sexual bondage) **and we are helpless because our fields and vineyards belong to others."** (Nehemiah 5:1-5)

What's happening here is there was this incredible taxation, this famine and this need for food, and the people were struggling. Then there were people among the people of God who had means and said, "Hey, I'll loan you money but you have to give me your fields. I'll give you some food, but you have to give me your children." They were exacting usury. They had an exorbitant price for their help and so these people were advantaging themselves against their

very own brothers within this family, within this community of followers of God. That's a little bit like when a hurricane hits, and the price of everything gets jacked up. Somebody seeks to take advantage of that moment where there is this incredible need, and so people gouge people. That is exactly what happened. These people were gouging each other, advantaging each other to the point that they decimated this community, creating division and resentment within. This did not set well with Nehemiah, as we see in verse 6:

> **Then I was very angry when I had heard their outcry and these words.**

This was righteous indignation. How could we treat each other like this? We are supposed to be people of God! We are supposed to be different! We're bringing light into the darkness. We are rebuilding *shalom* and flourishing, yet here we are treating each other poorly. Here we are disadvantaging others to advantage ourselves. So what did he do? Verse 7:

> **And I consulted with myself, and contended with the nobles and the rulers, and said to them, "You are exacting usury, each from his brother!" Therefore, I held a great assembly against them. And I said to them, "We according to our ability have redeemed our Jewish brothers who were sold to the nations; now would you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us?" Then they were silent and could not find a word to say. Again I said, "The thing which you are doing is not good; should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies?" And likewise I, my brother and my servants, are lending them money and grain. Please, let us leave off this usury. Please, give back to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive groves, and their houses, also the hundredth *part* of the money and of the grain, the new wine, and the oil that you are exacting from them."** (Vs. 7-11)

Nehemiah gets in the face of these people. He has to confront them and say, 'This is not right; you need to give it back; we need to get this squared away. We need to treat each other with respect; we need to be brothers; we have to stand together and model together as a community what it means to be the people of God." And they responded in verse 12:

> **Then they said, "We will give it back and will require nothing from them; we will do exactly as you say."** (And so just to make sure they actually followed through, Nehemiah didn't just take their word for it.) **So I called the priests and took an oath from them that they would do according to this promise. I also shook out the front of my garment and said, "Thus may God shake out every man from his house and from his possessions who does not fulfill this promise; even thus may he be shaken out and emptied." And all the assembly said, "Amen!" And they praised the LORD. Then the people did according to this promise.** (Vs. 12-13)

We're reminded in this story that sometimes the threat to the building of the kingdom of God is not external. Sometimes it's right here—it's what happening between us. Sometimes it's broken relationships within the church, within the people of God. Sometimes it's injustices that are being are done. Sometimes it revolves around money and power. But we have to be righteous! Satan would love nothing more than to create division and resentment within the people of God so that when we get so caught up with what's happening within, we are not focused on what He wants us to be building out. This has been the history of the church down through the centuries. If you can create division, the mission stops. All attention comes right here: resentment builds, and the work stops. We have to be vigilant about that. We have to take care of that. We have to

be sure that we treat each other well, that we respect and honor each other. That's part of what leadership has to do: create that culture and environment within the church where we're on mission together and treating each other well.

Nehemiah set a tremendous example himself in this and he outlines it in verses 14-19 about his own example. We don't have time to read it this morning, but evidently there was, prior to him being governor, governors who had lavish lifestyles personally, and they collected money from the people in order to support their very lavish eating and drinking and living habits. They thought that's what they deserved. They were the leaders. And Nehemiah makes it very clear that he was not going to do that. In fact in all the twelve years that he was in Jerusalem, it said that he never took the governor's allowance. He paid for his own food; he lived as the other people lived, never extracted from them, never laid a burden on them so he could live a lavish lifestyle. In fact he not only did that for himself, but he invited lots and lots of people—here he mentions one hundred fifty people—who ate at his table on a daily basis who were not a part of his immediate family. He was taking care of others and modeling what it means to do justice and to live righteously as a part of this community.

We are reminded that each of us must examine our own selves to see if we are doing what's right. Are we treating people well? Are we living righteously or is there unrighteousness in us? Is there sin within us that has the potential to stop the project...stop the mission that God has us on here in the world? Sin and selfishness will surely bring the building project to a stop.

So we have outside attacks against all the people, and Nehemiah organizes them and keeps them moving. There is this internal turmoil that he has to confront, and he seeks to model the right way to live. Now there is a third wave of attack that comes in the very beginning of Chapter 6 because, if none of that worked, the enemy is going to try one more thing: Verse 1:

> **Now it came about when it was reported to Sanballet, Tobiah, to Geshem the Arab, and to the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall, and *that* no breach remained in it, although at that time I had not set up the doors in the gates, that Sanballat and Geshem sent a *message* to me, saying, "Come, let us meet together at Chephirim in the plan of Ono." But they were planning to harm me. So I sent messengers to them, saying, "I am doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you?" And they sent *messages* to me four times in this manner, and I answered them in the same way. Then Sanballat sent his servant to me in the same manner a fifth time with an open letter in his hand.** ...meaning lots of other people had already read it. **In it was written, "It is reported among the nations, and Gashmu says, that you and the Jews are planning to rebel; therefore you are rebuilding the wall. And you are to be their king, according to these reports. And you have also appointed prophets to proclaim in Jerusalem concerning you, 'A king is in Judah!' And now it will be reported to the king according to these reports. So come now, let us take counsel together."** (Vs. 1-7)

They did everything they could to take out the leader. They finally concluded that this thing is just going to keep going unless we get rid of Nehemiah himself. Their plot was to draw Nehemiah out of the city where they could kill him. After four or five times trying to get him to come, they thought, "Well, we'll make up a fantastic story about him rebelling against the king, setting himself up as king, and maybe he'll be so incensed by that, he'll be so moved by that he'll

want to come down, and then we can wipe him out then." But Nehemiah doesn't fall for it. Verse 8:

> **Then I sent a message to him saying, Such things as you are saying have not been done, but you are inventing them in your own mind." for all of them were *trying* to frighten us, thinking, "They will become discouraged with the work and it will not be done."** (Vs. 8-9a)

There are often times when there is an attempt by people to discredit the leader. As a matter of fact, it's been common here at Lincoln Berean. In fact several people called the church this week to say, "Hey, have you seen what's on Craigslist," as someone had put all kinds of lies and misinformation about Bryan, about our church, about the leadership, about what we do with money, about what we stand for about various things. It's all meant to discredit and to destroy our reputation and to get people to say, "Hey, maybe that place isn't really what they claim to be." We deal with that on a regular basis. It's very real—people trying to take out the leader, bring him down with all kinds of lies, all kinds of innuendo. Nehemiah didn't fall for it, and notice his response at the end of verse 9:

> **But now, *O God*, strengthen my hands.**

Again he goes to prayer, asking God to just take care of him and allow them to keep on going. Well they had one more trick up their sleeve. Verse 10. Nehemiah gets invited to the house of a person who claims to be a prophet, who was confined at home, handicapped in some way and he invited Nehemiah over and then he said to Nehemiah,

> **"...let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and let's close the doors of the temple, for they are coming to kill you, and they are coming to kill you at night." But I said, "Should a man like me flee? And could one such as I go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in." Then I perceived that surely God had not sent him, but he uttered *his* prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. He was hired for this reason, that I might become frightened and act accordingly and sin, so that they might have an evil report in order that they could reproach me.** (Vs. 10b-13)

Now they are trying to trick him into sinning, to doing the wrong things, to going into the place where he should not go—that God had forbidden him to go—because if they could get him to sin, they could wipe out his reputation and bring this project to a standstill. Temptation is very real. Temptation is part of Satan's strategy to get us off mission, to engage in things that God forbids, which brings us to a place of ineffectiveness and our work in the kingdom stops. Do you get this sense of the overwhelming wave after wave of opposition that Nehemiah faced? Sometimes as a leader you say, "Do I really want to get up this morning?" Right? What's going to be the trouble of the day? Because when we are about doing God's work, we're going to have trouble. I think one of the great lessons here from Nehemiah is to expect opposition...expect trouble...expect difficulty. It's not going to be easy. This should not catch us off guard. But it also should not keep us from moving forward because God, in every case, was sufficient to meet that opposition, to face those challenges and because Nehemiah and these people walked with God, he confronted it in just the right way, and God allowed them to keep right on building.

We come to the end of our particular part of this story in these three weeks and it ends beginning in verse 15 of chapter 6:

So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of the *month* Elul, in fifty-two days. And it came about when all our enemies heard *of it,* and all the nations surrounding us saw *it,* they lost their confidence; for they recognized that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.

There was never a question in Nehemiah's mind about how this project—from the very beginning all the way to the wall being completed—got done. It happened because God was empowering them to do it. They walked with God; they listened to God; they planned with God; they confronted the enemies with God, and God gave the wisdom, the strength—everything they needed for this flourishing to be restored. That's the kind of faithful, good God we have, and this is an amazing feat. We wonder at times how the pyramids were built, how the sphinx was built, but we know that happened over many, many years. But here we have an entire walled city that was rebuilt in just **52 days**. Now think about this. Nehemiah prayed for four months and the work was finished in 52 days.

That might be a good ratio for us: prayer, listening to God, getting God's plan, then this resolve, this commitment, to follow it through all the way to see God's kingdom built in the way He wants it built. This persistence and perseverance marked Nehemiah and his people. They persisted and they persevered in spite of incredible difficulties, and this is the challenge for us in our time. We not only need to be more prayerful and more broken over the brokenness of the world, we not only need to do a better job of preparing and planning and thinking well about how we actually bring the gospel of the kingdom to our community and to the world, but we will, once we land on that plan and God shows us what to do, we will need to persist and persevere no matter what Satan throws at us. Whether it's external enemies, whether it's internal conflict that needs to be resolved, whether its threats against the leader, we must prevail and persist. There is a tendency among us I think today to really want nice quick easy solutions. "I'm happy to get involved in restoring the brokenness of the world as long as it doesn't take too much time...as long as it doesn't cost me too much money...as long I don't have to stay at it for a very long time." But I am here to tell you whether on a micro level of just you trying to bring restoration and the healing of the gospel to an individual or whether you are trying to step into a big gaping wound and hole in society and do something about it, there is only one way that the kingdom will really be built and flourish and restored, and that is that it will take a long term commitment on our part. There are no quick, easy solutions. As a matter of fact, we need to think probably upside down from Nehemiah. Nehemiah did this in 52 days; we ought to think 52 years. Our commitment to our community, to the global peoples of the world, means that we are willing to stay at the building of God's kingdom until our last dying breath. We will give ourselves to this project as long as it takes to see flourishing come, whether to an individual, a family, a neighborhood, or a community. It will take long-term commitment on our part.

I wish we had time to go through these next chapters of Nehemiah because this was just the beginning of the story. Nehemiah had to rebuild the wall and had to solve the physical brokenness before they could get to the deeper issue of spiritual brokenness. Awhat transpires in the coming chapters is an incredible spiritual awakening that happened among God's people here in Jerusalem. They couldn't really process and think about what needed to happen on the inside of their hearts because they didn't have food, safety, and security. Their physical environment was so broken that they couldn't even begin to process their deep spiritual need. But after the

physical need was met, the emotional need was met, Nehemiah led this incredible revival of spiritual life, and these people began to walk with God and experience real holistic flourishing.

That is always our goal when building the kingdom of God. We are never content with just making people's lives a little bit easier in the here and now, even though we know God does care about those immediate needs—physical needs in the here and now. But our goal is the holistic flourishing of people—body, mind, soul and spirit. Jesus cared for all those things. We're not compartmentalized into little pieces and God only cares about the heart. He cares about the whole person. He fed the hungry; He healed the sick; He met the emotional needs of people, but He also invited them in to experience life everlasting with Him. And so our mission is holistic. It's to restore the *whole* person, the *whole* community, in the way God's kingdom truly offers restoration and renewal.

As we conclude, I want to say that I feel this story is one that's filled with so much hope, so much motivation, and so much encouragement. If this city that was so decimated and destroyed can be rebuilt, then surely we as the people of God can make a profound difference right here in our own community and around the world. I come away from this story saying, "I want to be Nehemiah. I want to be like Nehemiah. I want to have that kind of faith. I want to have that kind of compassion. I want to have my heart in alignment with God's heart like that. I want to be moved to action, moved to prayer, moved to planning, moved to perseverance and persistence. I believe, God, You can use me to change the world," and I hope that in this auditorium this morning, every single one of us says, "I want to be a Nehemiah. I want to rebuild. I want to be a part of God's grand project here on earth." I want you to know that you are sitting among many, many, many Nehemiah's. There are hundreds of people within this church who live out the story of Nehemiah in their own life. They have passion; they are involved; they are building things, and they are serving people. Next week as we come to our *State of the Church* service, we will get to celebrate and reflect on those things that are happening. But there's so much more that can be done, so much brokenness in the world, and God has called us as the children of Light, the Hope of the world, to be involved. So let's build it! Let's build something great together for His glory!

> *Father, we pray what Jesus told us to pray, that Your kingdom will come, and Your will will be done on earth as it is in heaven—that the flourishing that happens in Your presence in the heavens would come to every family, neighborhood, community, city, state and nation in this world and that you would raise up a people in these days in every place to build. May we be faithful to be Nehemiah's in our own time and in this place. In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

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