

**Staying Faithful -
Faithfulness is easier said than done.
Nehemiah 6:1-19**

(Expanded Sermon Notes)



It has been well over six months since he started praying and seeking what the Lord would have him do after he heard the news about Jerusalem. It has been fifty-two days since they started the wall project. The thing that stirred up so much controversy is now over. But the conflict does not stop for Nehemiah. Life as an exile is hard. Life as spiritual exiles in our current cultural moment is hard. That's the thing about faithfulness to God; if it was easy, everyone would be known for it. We should be encouraged by Nehemiah's struggle. It affirms our own struggle. He did life God's way and faced trials. It is the same for us, at least that is what James and Peter think. The key question in our struggle needs to be, are we facing trials because we're doing life God's way or because we're picking fights? Nehemiah faced trials because he was directly following God. But, too often, we think we're following God, but really we're picking fights over non-essentials or wording. We need to be careful. We also need to realize that faithfulness is never a walk in the park. But, there is good news. God has filled us with his Spirit and helps us to walk in faithfulness both through strength and discernment. If we want to be known as faithful people, we need to be concerned not just about having right theological convictions but also about right methodology (living those convictions out), particularly when it comes to living in a religiously and philosophically pluralistic world. For Nehemiah and gang, their worldview was not the dominant perspective. They were exiles in their own homeland and theological minorities. Yet, we continue to see Nehemiah lead and live with right theology and right methodology. No, his opposers don't become his best friends. But, he lives in a way that is thoughtful about how he interacts and doesn't unnecessarily stir up trouble or get duped by them. Faithfulness is easier said than done. **But, if we want to be faithful, Nehemiah's example teaches us that how we handle things is just as important as the convictions we hold.**

The situation: Nehemiah's story

- a. In this chapter, we will come to hear that the wall is done! (v.15)
 - i. The operation was, throughout, a triumph of concentration amidst every kind of distraction. **Its speed is measured by the fact that *Elul* was the sixth month of the year, which began with Nisan (2:1) in the spring. Into that time Nehemiah had crowded all the events of chapters 2 to 6.**¹
 - ii. Either way, less than six months had passed since Nehemiah first received his commission (cf. 2:1), and the work itself took only fifty-two days.²
- b. Even in the midst of the success of finishing the wall, the opposition kept coming.
- c. Sanballat and Tobiah had much to lose if Nehemiah would rise to provincial power in the region.
 - i. Let's try to see things from Sanballat's point of view, **we shall surely conclude that it was Nehemiah himself whom he will have regarded as the chief stumbling block to peace.** Prior to his coming, if our surmise about Tobiah is correct (cf. 2:10), relations between Samaria and Jerusalem will have been established on an excellent footing after the debacle of Ezra 4. It seems from the end of our present chapter as though Tobiah had succeeded well in getting himself accepted in Jerusalem. If one could eliminate him, good relationships would soon be restored.³
- d. They now waged a disinformation campaign against Nehemiah.
 - i. **6:1-9 – False alliances and a slander campaign.**
 - 1. The first point is that the wall-building was in preparation for a revolt against the Persian authorities. Sanballat doubtless knew that precisely this charge had been (falsely) made during the attempt to rebuild the walls not so very long before; cf. Ezra 4:7–16. **On that occasion, the charge had succeeded in securing an order from the king that the work should cease (vv 17–22). He may have thought that history could repeat itself in the last resort.**⁴
 - 2. The slander comes in the form of accusing Nehemiah with the plot of subversion against the king.⁵
 - ii. **6:10-14 – Distraction and internal discrediting.**
 - 1. Though working in collaboration with Sanballat, **he was in a better position to arrange for Nehemiah to be discredited within his own community.**
 - a. Tobiah tried to drive a wedge between him and the priesthood in particular. He was on close terms with the priests (cf. 13:4), and they in turn exercised considerable influence over the native population of Jerusalem.⁶
 - 2. **Nehemiah would likely have died in the Temple. (v.11)**
 - a. **Maybe it would have been ok...** In any case, there was no guarantee that assassins would respect **the law of asylum** (cf. 1 Kgs 2:28–34), nor was

¹ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 110.

² H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 260.

³ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 254.

⁴ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 256.

⁵ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 255.

⁶ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 257–258.

Nehemiah in one of the carefully defined situations to which the laws of sanctuary applied.⁷

iii. **6:15-19 – Gaslighting... It’s not how you thought it was.**

1. For whatever reason, this group tried to encourage a more positive attitude by Nehemiah toward Tobiah. The riff was damaging to their interests, and so they tried to mediate. Ironically, however, Nehemiah records that the only direct communications he had from Tobiah belied the genuineness of their intentions.⁸
 2. Remember, we know that Tobiah was powerful and influential among leading Jewish families in Judah. → This shift in power could have felt threatening for them.
 - a. Although Tobiah was an official under Sanballat in Samaria, he had at some point been resident in Jerusalem. **It was most likely during such a period that he and his son had married into Jewish families** (for the family of Arah, cf. Ezra 2:5; for Meshullam, son of Berechiah, cf. Neh 3:4 and 30, where it was suggested that he was an important official).⁹
- e. So, how do we stay faithful when facing persistent opposition?
- i. Let’s dive in a little deeper from our look at the importance of worldview from last week.
 1. Remember, staying faithful in the face of opposition isn’t just about right belief or theology, it is also about right methodology.
 2. **Nehemiah’s example shows us the importance of having both.**

1. Right Theology

- a. Renewing of our minds – The process of worldview construction.
 - i. Important: Even if you do not know what a worldview is, we all have one, and it operates in the background of our lives every single day.
 - ii. A worldview is – The lens in which you interpret the events, actions, and ideas of the world you’re living in.
- iii. **We must commit to the renewing of our minds. – Rom. 12:2**
 1. **²Do 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.**
 2. **“It’s called the brain: “The brain should act as a sort of mental immune system, examining cultural ideas as they come in, considering their likely consequences, rejecting the ones that are liable to do harm and accepting those that are apt to help.” – Dr. Kevin Vanhoozer**¹⁰
 - a. To follow Jesus in a life-defining way, means that his priorities, perspectives, and precepts become ours in an increasing way.
 - b. This means we are to increasingly feel at odds with or in tension with the prevailing mantras of the culture of this age.
- iv. **A worldview answers the following questions:**

⁷ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 258.

⁸ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 261.

⁹ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 261.

¹⁰ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “What Is Everyday Theology?: How and Why Christians Should Read Culture,” in *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Charles A. Anderson, and Michael J. Sleasman, Cultural Exegesis (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 31.

1. What is prime reality—the really real?
 2. What is the nature of external reality, that is, the world around us?
 3. What is a human being?
 4. What happens to a person at death?
 5. Why is it possible to know anything at all?
 6. How do we know what is right and wrong?
 7. What is the meaning of human history?
 8. What personal, life-orienting core commitments are consistent with this worldview?
- v. How do we construct a distinctly Christian worldview?**
1. **A foundational authority** – The Bible
 - a. A mirror to see ourselves and a lens to see God.
 2. **Educate** – Commit yourself to learning God’s values.
 3. **Evaluate** – As you interact with culture evaluate what you are hearing and seeing against what you know to be true from Scripture.
 - a. Both education and evaluation happen in community and continue to be a process over time.
 4. **Be humble** – Remember that our tendency is to drift away from the values of the kingdom and to settle for the values of this age. Pride will tell you that you are always right, humility will allow you to practice repentance and growth.
 - a. Humility also allows us to resist the dangerous idea that Christianity is a monolith when it comes to culture, theology, and, specifically, political policies.
 - b. There are things the church has always agreed on. → That is orthodoxy.
 - c. Then there is liberty for non-essentials.
 - d. Finally, charity in all other things. → I.e., It is possible to read the same texts, come up with the same ethical conviction, and see the best way to implement that conviction in society through different policies.
- vi. As we continue to journey with Nehemiah and his people, we will watch the unfolding process of their worldview reconstruction.**
1. The question we must ask ourselves, “**What elements of my worldview need to be reconstructed and refined to be more Jesus and gospel-centered?**”
- b. What were Nehemiah’s theological convictions? → These made up his worldview.**
- i. **God was his strength** – (v. 9)
 1. This has been a persistent theme through the book. Nehemiah sees the source of his strength and the strength of the people in God.
 2. Because God was strong and was giving him strength, he was motivated to continue.
 - ii. **God was behind this mission** – (v.16)
 1. The sense in which the surrounding people *were afraid* would be that they were awed, rather than apprehensive. Their respect for the Jews and their God was increased, and their self-esteem diminished. So the very size of the circle which Sanballat had managed to draw round Jerusalem (see on 4:7) brought all the wider recognition of God’s power. Cf. e.g. Paul’s experience of the fruits of persecution in Philippians 1:12ff.¹¹
 2. Despite the opposition, the work progressed, finished, and gave glory to God.

¹¹ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 110.

- a. **This is a clarifying lens for Nehemiah, you want stop or hinder the work, you're not on the same mission.**
 - b. Because God
- 3. **Caution – Don't over spiritualize.** (Two wrong perspectives.)
 - a. Because there is opposition, God is behind the mission.
 - i. I.e., It must be tough.
 - b. Because there isn't opposition, God is behind the mission.
 - i. I.e., There must be physical blessings.
- iii. **He (Nehemiah) belonged to God** – I.e., His identity is wrapped up in belonging to God's family.
 - 1. More than anything this is the ultimate lens that influences Nehemiah's worldview.
 - a. **I belong to God and I am to honor God, therefore, everything that I do must be filtered through that lens.**
 - 2. Why does he pray the way he does in 4:4-5 and 6:14?
 - a. Their opposition wasn't about Nehemiah, he is so connected to God in his identity that he feels the offense for God.
 - b. Now, rather than take the law into his own hands, **he prefers to invoke by implication the repeated biblical teaching that vengeance is the prerogative of God alone** (e.g., Deut 32:35; Ps 94:1; Rom 12:19).¹²

2. Right Methodology

- a. **A recap of Nehemiah's savviness up to this point.**
 - i. **Right methodology comes from a right identity. → We see in Nehemiah the impact of being secure in your identity.**
 - 1. **He knew who he was, because he knew whose he was.**
 - ii. Ultimately, our methodology will always flow from our identity. Why? Because identity dictates the way we think and the way we think dictates our actions.
 - 1. We've said it this way before – A changed heart leads to a changed mind. And a changed mind leads to a changed life.
 - 2. Bonhoeffer put it like this, **"It is not by astuteness, by knowing the tricks, but by simple steadfastness in the truth of God, by training the eye upon this truth until it is simple and wise, that there comes the experience and knowledge of the ethical reality."** – Dietrich Bonhoeffer¹³
 - 3. His right identity enables him to respond wisely and strategically in tough moments.
 - iii. **1:4** – Prays for four months after hearing the report.
 - iv. **2:3** – Asks the king for leave and resources in a timely and honorable way.
 - v. **2:9ff** – Arrives with written authority, military support, and still surveys at night.
 - 1. He also doesn't give away his plans too soon. (2:16)
 - vi. **3:5** – He doesn't let a few nay-sayers derail the team.
 - vii. **4** – Prays and takes outside threats seriously.
 - viii. **5** – Listens to internal complaints and leads by example.
- b. **How does Nehemiah practice right methodology here in chapter 6?**¹⁴

¹² H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 260.

¹³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*. (1949)

¹⁴ Larry Osborne, *Nehemiah – How to lead anything*. (2004)

- i. **Keeps his focus** – (v.3) “The job is really important and not done... I can’t come.”
 - 1. **Distractions** are the greatest threat to following God faithfully in and through what he has next for you and for our church.
 - a. Remember, it’s not over until it’s over.
 - b. “So we finished the wall.” (v. 15)
 - i. Remember, from his commissioning till the completion of the wall, it has been around 6-months.
 - 2. **Beware of “new opportunities”.**
 - a. Nehemiah knows that the task at hand is the primary task and he needs to stay focused on it.
 - b. He doesn’t celebrate too soon or pursue new things in the middle of the project.
 - ii. **Avoids foolish alliances** – (vv. 2, 9, 12, 19) “They want to make me afraid.”
 - 1. We are most vulnerable to teaming up with the wrong people when we are overwhelmed or seem to be offered a “once in a lifetime opportunity.”
 - 2. **The best predictor of future behavior is past behavior.**
 - a. Nehemiah knows who they will be because of who they were.
 - b. This is a reality that every dating couple, engaged couple, married couple needs to take seriously.
 - c. This is a reality that we need to take seriously when considering jobs and friendships.
 - i. **It is really a prideful or naive thing to think that they will be different this time, or that they’ll be different with me.**
 - iii. **Resists “special situation” compromises** – (v.11) “Should I run away... and sin?”
 - 1. “I wouldn’t normally do this... but, just this once.”
 - a. How many of have been burned when we’ve broken a boundary or compromised a little just once?
 - b. How many of us have been hurt because we thought we could get away without the safety protocols on a job or hobby just once.
 - c. Rewind: 5:9 → Nehemiah addresses the importance of not cutting corners.
 - i. **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?”**
 - 2. **We’re most vulnerable when we’re afraid that doing it God’s way won’t work out.**
 - a. How often has this been true in our lives?
 - i. Relationships
 - ii. Finances
 - iii. Integrity
 - iv. Priorities / Values
 - b. Consider Uzziah (2 Chron. 26) – He decided to what was reserved for the priests and violate God’s boundaries for worship in the Temple.
- c. **Right methodology also needs right motivation** - What is our goal – **To be right or to be understood?**
 - i. **Nehemiah responds to each opposition with clarity and in a way that doesn’t make a tough situation harder.**
 - 1. Have you ever given the right response in the wrong way? Why did that happen? Sometimes it is a genuine mistake. Most others though, we’ve lost our cool and now we have something to own in the conflict. → “I was rude, short, curt, unfair, etc.”

2. When representing Christ, is our motivation to be right or to be understood?
 - a. I don't have to be thoughtful about my response if I only want to be right.
 - b. I do have to be thoughtful if I want to represent Christ well and be understood.
3. Let us contrast the methods that come from those two different motivations.
- ii. We live in a moment that says: (be right)
 1. Be loud – You have a moral responsibility to be heard.
 2. Be an influencer – Your life only matters if you make a difference.
 3. Don't forsake yourself – The only truth you have or could know is your truth.
- iii. The Bible says: (be understood)
 1. Live a quiet life - **But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more,¹¹ and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you,¹² so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.** – 1 Thes. 4:10-12
 2. Be faithful - ⁵⁸**Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.** – Cor. 15:58
 3. Deny yourself - **And he said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."²⁴ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.²⁵ For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?** – Luke 9:23-25
- d. What is our goal – Our glory or God's glory? (v.16)
 - i. This all comes back to the reality of Nehemiah's identity. Because he was so centered on his identity as a member in the family of God, he was always about God's glory.
 1. We hear this in his prayers and statements:
 - a. 1:5 – God is loyal.
 - b. 2:8 – God's good hand was on me.
 - c. 2:20 – God will make us prosper.
 - d. 4:9 – God will protect us.
 - e. 4:14 – God is great and awesome... don't fear.
 - f. 4:20 – God will fight for us.
 - g. 5:19 – God let my motivations be pure and known to be pure.
 - h. 6:16 – God helped us.
 - ii. We hear this in the result of finishing the wall. (v.16)
 1. The sense in which the surrounding people *were afraid* would be that **they were awed**, rather than apprehensive. Their respect for the Jews and their God was increased, and their self-esteem diminished. So the very size of the circle which Sanballat had managed to draw round Jerusalem (see on 4:7) brought all the wider recognition of God's power. Cf. e.g. Paul's experience of the fruits of persecution in Philippians 1:12ff.¹⁵
 2. The result was not Nehemiah's glory or the people's glory. It was that when outsiders looked upon what had been done and what happened, they could only confess that it was a thing of God.

¹⁵ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 110.

- a. When others look at our lives, do they get the picture that what makes our lives different is that Jesus is doing an important work in us? Or, do they get the picture that it is all about us?