August 24, 2014

Nehemiah 6:1-11; 15-16

Change your world in 52 days: Finishing Strong[[1]](#footnote-2)

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Nehemiah 6:1-11, 15-16 (New Revised Standard Version)

Now when it was reported to Sanballat and Tobiah and to Geshem the Arab and to the rest of our enemies that I had built the wall and that there was no gap left in it (though up to that time I had not set up the doors in the gates), Sanballat and Geshem sent to me, saying, “Come and let us meet together in one of the villages in the plain of Ono.” But they intended to do me harm. 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 to come down to you?” They sent to me four times in this way, and I answered them in the same manner. In the same way Sanballat for the fifth time sent his servant to me with an open letter in his hand. In it was written, “It is reported among the nations—and Geshem also says it—that you and the Jews intend to rebel; that is why you are building the wall; and according to this report you wish to become their king. You have also set up prophets to proclaim in Jerusalem concerning you, ‘There is a king in Judah!’ And now it will be reported to the king according to these words. So come, therefore, and let us confer together.” Then I sent to him, saying, “No such things as you say have been done; you are inventing them out of your own mind”  —for they all wanted to frighten us, thinking, “Their hands will drop from the work, and it will not be done.” But now, O God, strengthen my hands. One day when I went into the house of Shemaiah son of Delaiah son of Mehetabel, who was confined to his house, he said, “Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and let us close the doors of the temple, for they are coming to kill you; indeed, tonight they are coming to kill you.” But I said, “Should a man like me run away? Would a man like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in!”

So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. 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.

This is our last Sunday to study Nehemiah and in the scripture that we read today, Nehemiah has finished the task that he felt God calling him to do. The wall has been rebuilt in 52 days. Today our focus is how you finish strong.

To set the scene, it is 444 B.C. and Nehemiah is a Jew who was the cup-bearer to the King in Persia. He would taste the wine before the King would drink it to make sure that it was not poisoned. One day Nehemiah’s brother came to visit and Nehemiah asked how things were in Jerusalem. And his brother said that the walls were still broken down, the gates were burned, the people were vulnerable, and nobody can get it fixed.

And suddenly, this very ordinary person had an extraordinary burden. It moved him to tears, he started fasting and he started praying. He talked to the king and asked for permission to go rebuild the walls and the king blessed him. Nehemiah traveled a thousand miles, and after the walls had been down for 140 years, he told the people of Jerusalem and said, 'I believe that God can use us to rebuild the walls.' And he started this project and God used him to do what everybody else thought was completely impossible. To make a difference in this world, you don’t have to be the best, you just have to care the most.

In the scripture that we read together, the walls have been rebuilt but there is one thing left, the doors have not been set in the gates. And the closer that it gets to Nehemiah finishing the work that he feels God has called him to do, it seems like there are more and more things that are in his way. We don’t face opposition because we are doing something wrong; we face opposition because we are doing something right. And the opposition that we face is not from God, it is just a part of life.

We are moving towards something and we’re about to accomplish it and then there's resistance. I remember when we were going to change the kitchen faucet in our home and what was supposed to just be a quick job took the entire day. And when we wanted to have the fixtures replaced in the bathroom and found out that we had a leak. A lot of our resistance comes during home repair.

Or you decide that you want to strengthen your marriage. You’ve been married for a number of years and Christ isn't the center of your marriage, so you are going to strengthen your marriage and you are going to church! And then, someone's late and someone's rude and on the way to church all hell breaks loose and you get in a fight! Now, not you, that's never happened to you, but in other families and in other churches it happens all of the time! I've heard about it!

Or you're losing weight, remember your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, and you're going to honor God and you're like down to the final ten pounds, you've lost all of this weight! The final ten pounds and you go to the store and there's a sale on Twinkies! It's buy one box get 2 boxes free! And the closer we get to doing what God wants done the harder it is.

In Nehemiah’s story, Nehemiah’s enemies try to distract him and take him off of the wall, and take him away from his work. Nehemiah was making all of this progress, and his enemies want to distract him from what God has called him to do. And they not only want to distract him, but they want to physically harm him.

We have big distractions in our own lives, but often it is the little distractions over time that turn into big distractions. You're going to do something great and you are at your computer and you're going to hammer out this plan of how you're going to impact the world and help people who don't have clean drinking water. And you decide before you start, I'm just going to get on Facebook for just a minute, and 2 hours later, you haven't done anything! And it is the little things that turn into big things and distract us from our work.

But we have to remember Nehemiah’s words when distractions came, “I am doing a great work and I cannot come down.” I'm not coming down; I’m doing something important! Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you? We have to have the courage to say no to distractions, even if they're good!

As we begin this new school year with all of its demands and juggling of schedules, may we hear these words today: Just because you could do something does not mean you should do something. Remember your work on the wall and don’t let anything take you away from that. May we not be so busy with work and school and activities, that we are distracted from the work that God wants us to do. May we not become distracted and then realize that it is the end of September and we have not had one dinner together as a family.

I'm doing a great work and it's not that what you're asking me isn't important, but I can't come down right now! I'm doing a great work and I can't come down. Or, I'm building this business and going to Bible Study and sure, you want me to play on the softball team, or go on the hunting trip, or go on whatever; but this season in my life I'm doing a great work and I can't come down!

For Nehemiah there were distractions, but there were also folks trying to discredit him by spreading rumors. Does it ever feel like when you are trying to do good, the more that folks misinterpret your motives or misunderstand what you're doing. Sanballat sends an open, unsealed letter to Nehemiah. The implication is that it was meant to be read publicly to discredit Nehemiah. And in the letter, it was written that the Jews were rebuilding the wall because they were planning to revolt and that Nehemiah wants to be the king. When you are trying to change the world, people are going to talk about you and spread rumors. We don't face opposition because we are doing something wrong, we face opposition because we are doing something right. And what Nehemiah did is very simple, he just said, “Hey, not true!” Then he prayed and then he got back to work.

Hey, not true, pray, get back to work. Get on the wall and don't let what somebody else says take you away from doing what God called you to do! And when something happens to distract you, remind yourself that you came here to build a wall and you’re not stopping until the wall is built. You are not giving up. You are not giving up your good name, you are not giving up your integrity, and you are not giving up your cause, because God has created you to do this work.

This week I have smiled lots as I have seen all of the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge videos. I cried as I watched the ESPN story of the creator of the Ice Bucket Challenge phenomenon, Pete Frates who was a Boston College outfielder who was diagnosed with ALS at the age of 27. With each video that I have watched of people pouring ice water on their head, I have thought about and prayed for our very own Tony Wood who lives with ALS and currently lives in Seattle. One person made the first ice bucket video and now it is a worldwide movement raising awareness and money for a disease that many people did not even know about. Friday night I was at Target and I heard some folks laughing and one of them said to the other, “I thought it was called ASL.” But now they know what the disease is called, now they are invested. I want to invite you today to set a goal of your own. What is the wall that you want to build? Who is the King that you have to talk to? Who are the people that you have to invite to work with you? What are the obstacles that you may face? Name your goal and take steps to turn it into reality. Get out a pen, send yourself an email, do something to hold yourself accountable so that your goal can become real.

God loves to use ordinary people and give them extraordinary callings. When God gives us a burden so great that one day we sit down to cry, then we kneel down to pray, and then we stand up to act and say, “No, not on my watch. I'm not okay with this. On behalf of God, somebody has got to do something about this, and it might as well be me.” And we believe that even though everyone else thinks it is impossible, we know with God all things are possible.

We define the vision clearly. We figure out what we are going to do, we are going to rebuild this wall, we are going to mentor kids at Wesley Rankin in West Dallas, we are going to prioritize our family and family dinners and limit our activities. We are going to stand in the gap for those who are trapped in human trafficking, we are going to grow closer to God by participating in a Bible Study (Tuesday nights 6:30 pm). We are going to put God first in our lives by not only coming to worship Sunday mornings, but coming at 10 am for Sunday School. We define the mission clearly, then we make plans carefully and we figure out the next step, then the next step, then the next step. Then, we inspire people passionately.

Then, if we get discouraged, we remember God who is great and awesome and we fight for the cause. We fight for our sons and for our daughters, and for our families and our homes and when we are discouraged we remember the Lord and get back to work. And when distractions come our way, we remind ourselves that we are doing a great work. And at the end of Nehemiah’s story, the wall was completed in 52 days through leadership and determination. And what was once thought impossible has been done with the help of God.

To make a difference in this world, you don’t have to be the best, you just have to care the most. God is calling you and me to change the world. So, today I pray for those who are hitting the wall. And I thank God that we have the ability to go over, under, through, around whatever obstacles will be there. And may God’s Holy Spirit give us endurance and strength not to give up, and to stay on the wall working and praying.

1. This sermon series is taken from http://open.lifechurch.tv [↑](#footnote-ref-2)