

Who Shall I Fear?

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[0:00] Amen. This is God's word. Please keep those words open. As ever, we're going to spend our time! We're going to spend our time looking at them, unpacking them, and drawing out of them what God would have us to hear and to learn.

And so let's pray for God to do that. Father, we thank you so much that we can come into your presence and fix our eyes on you and be directed in your truth and guided by your word.

Father, we thank you so much that we come not to a temple made by hands, but a temple made by you, living stones built up together on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Jesus Christ as the cornerstone. So build us up together today, we pray by your holy word. Speak to us, we ask.

For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. The Lord is my light and my salvation. Who shall I fear?

The Lord is the stronghold of my life. Of whom shall I be afraid? There's words written long ago by King David, but they could well have been spoken, couldn't they, by Nehemiah the governor in our passage today.

[1:21] Because as we pick up chapter 6 this morning, we find that fear, fear is a very real weapon in the hands of the enemy as he tries to stop God's work.

And now perhaps you groaned inwardly when you heard that the troublesome trio was back, Sambalat, Tobiah, and Geshem. What do these guys want now?

They know by now that they can't get their claws into the cracks in the wall because, well, there aren't any. The wall is pretty much done. But more to the point, their opposition is futile.

Because in God's strength, God's people closed in together, they put their trust in the Lord, and they stayed united in his work. But after a little break to regroup, the opposition is back, and they're back with a cunning plan.

I wonder if you spotted it. They figure, we don't need to get to all God's people to stop the work. Only one of them. Right?

[2:28] Get Nehemiah, and the rest will be easy. Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered. And just as the plan is more cunning, so the strategy is more subtle.

Rather than head-on attacks, this time they come with scare tactics and intimidation. Do you see that in verse 9? Nehemiah says, They all wanted to frighten us, thinking their hands will drop from the work and it won't be done.

Or verse 13, For this purpose he was hired, that I should be afraid. Just like the other false prophets, the end of verse 14, he wanted to make me afraid.

And we see it again, the very last word of our chapter, verse 19, Tobiah sent letters to make me afraid. Nehemiah labors the point, doesn't he? What did they want? To frighten him, to scare him.

We don't need to harm everyone. He says, we just need to shake one man's heart. Let's put the fear in Nehemiah, so that everyone can see what a coward he is. So that in a moment of reckless impulse, he'll do something stupid and discredit himself.

[3:40] Or perhaps slowly over time, get worn down to a quivering wreck. It's very devious, isn't it? And it carries all the trademarks of the enemy, as we'll see on our way through.

But all the more this morning, I hope what we'll see is that as God's chosen leader stands strong in the face of fear and threats and opposition, so we can look to God's true King, Jesus, and rely upon him for our strength, and learn from him how we're to stay strong in the face of fear today.

Who should we turn to in times of trouble? And how does he help us to keep building up even when we are afraid? Firstly, then, the biggest part of our passage, verse 1 to 14, when enemies threaten, I wonder, are we afraid?

Nehemiah gives us two examples of how they tried to frighten him into giving up, beginning by trying to get him to stop God's work to defend himself, to defend his name or his honor.

So that's verse 1 to 9. Just see how sneaky these guys are. Verse 1, we get the familiar phrase that our enemies heard that I built the wall.

[5:00] And on hearing that, what do they try this time? Well done, Nehemiah. Well done. We said you couldn't do it.

We said it couldn't be done, but credit where it's due, you've built your wall. Now we'd like to cordially invite you to sit up at the big boy table. Meet us halfway. Come do a deal with us.

It sounds so reasonable, doesn't it? Who could say no? Finally, Nehemiah is getting the respect he deserves, right? And what could be wrong with a bit of diplomacy? But Nehemiah is too grounded to be flattered and he's too sharp to be fooled.

He sees right through it. Verse 2, they intended to do me harm. So he declines the offer that they thought he couldn't refuse. I sent messengers back, saying, I'm doing a great work.

I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you? Now I think we should see how brave Nehemiah's reply is.

[6:04] For him, it's kind of a lose-lose, isn't it? Because either he could go and he would be harmed or he could not go and he'd lose face. But Nehemiah chooses to lose face in the sight of the watching world rather than risk the work stopping.

You can just hear these guys saying, can't you, we tried to be reasonable. We reached out to him. But he doesn't want to talk. He doesn't want peace. You know, we know that's what they're trying to do because they keep up the barrage.

They sent to me this way four times. So Nehemiah is being forced over and over repeatedly to turn down offers to talk. You say you want peace, Nehemiah, but you're not even willing to speak to us?

So stubborn. So difficult. So arrogant. But despite that, Nehemiah apparently doesn't think twice. Four times they asked the same thing.

Four times I answered in the same manner. If you think that sounds easy, you haven't spent enough time around toddlers. Right? Toddlers know how to get under your skin and all they have to do is ask the same thing over and over and over and over again.

[7:16] I want a biscuit. No. I want a biscuit. I said no. I want a biscuit. Later. I want a biscuit. I have said no. Right? They wear you down.

It's their way of making you feel like a terrible person for being a good parent. It's tough to hold the line, especially when you sound like a monster. How much more Nehemiah and his peacenik opponents?

I wonder, brothers and sisters, are you willing to look and feel like a bad and stubborn and difficult person to keep building up the church and keep growing God's kingdom?

Why not come to the interfaith dialogue and share what we all have in common? No thanks. Why don't you show Christian unity by being part of our church's together group?

All views welcome. No thanks. Everyone with a heart who cares is signing up to this agenda, supporting this cause. Add your voice.

[8 : 24] No thank you. How can you call yourself a caring person and be part of a church that teaches that? Hear that enough times and you start to question yourself.

Am I being unreasonable? Am I a monster? Friends, don't give in to that pressure two, three, four times. As often as our opponents come knocking, we come back with the same response, not because we're heartless, but because we know what is at stake if we stop the work, get sidetracked, get distracted, and the glorious and eternity-shaping work that Christ has entrusted to us gets left undone.

We serve at the pleasure of the King of Kings, so we come back to His Word. We hear His voice and we say to our enemies, why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you? Now that's not to be rude, right?

Nehemiah hasn't cut them off. He's talking to them. He's communicating. But don't take the bait. Ignore the prodding. Brush off the false guilt and keep your hand firmly in the Lord's work.

Even when those unspoken insults become open threats, the fifth time Sambalak comes with an open letter, so it's there for everyone to see with rumors Nehemiah is going to stage a coup.

[9 : 44] It's been reported, and Geshem also says, notice, isn't it, oldest trick in the book, asking for a friend, that you and the Jews intend to rebel, and that's why you're building the wall.

The only reason we can think you're on your high horse, Nehemiah, he says, must be because you want to be king. I mean, haven't you had prophets go and publicize this fact? I hope the proper king never hears about this.

Dot, dot, dot. How about that chap, then? It's pretty obvious, isn't it, what he's doing. It's blackmail.

I can get you in a lot of trouble unless you do what I say. The letter's full of lies, full of slander, threats. What can Nehemiah do? Surely now we think he has to do something about this.

At what point does the damage to his reputation and name become so bad that he does need to stop the work? Well, never.

[10 : 47] I said to them saying, no such things as you've been done, you are inventing them out of your own mind, full stop. How could he be so chilled about this?

Right, everything's at stake. Well, it's because he knows what they really want, doesn't he? And he's not going to give it to them. They wanted to frighten us, thinking their hand will drop from the work and it will not be done.

If your name has ever been called into disrepute, if you've ever had lies told about you, you will know how easy it will have been for Nehemiah to press pause on the work, clear his name, defend his honor.

Does he do that? No. We should never stop God's work in self-defense. I take it Nehemiah did feel his strength failing because he prays, doesn't he?

Now, O God, strengthen my hands. But through prayer, Nehemiah was not overcome by fear. He didn't respond to the threats. Rather, he found strength in God and he just carried on.

[11:52] Of course, we see the same unflinching resolve in our true King, Jesus Christ. Many bore false witness against him, but their testimony did not agree.

Have you no answer to make, said the high priest. But he remained silent and did not answer. Friends, if you're a Christian today, your faithfulness will be tested as Jesus' was.

How many traps, stumbling blocks, distractions were put in his path on his way to the cross? Countless times we read, they came to test him. They came to test him.

You'll be intimidated and harassed if you belong to him. If not by human opponents, then by spiritual opponents. Because the enemy loves to scare us off from doing what Jesus has given us.

This could get you in all kinds of trouble, he says to us. You'll be falsely accused, sometimes openly, sometimes inwardly. One of the ways that the Bible describes the devil is as the accuser.

[13:00] He loves to make us feel guilty for things that we shouldn't. You're getting it all wrong, he says. There's no way back from here. But like Nehemiah, the Lord Jesus did not stop God's work to leap to his own defense, to clear his name.

He knew it was all made up, so he stood silently and stuck to the task the Father had given him, even to death and death on the cross. And we can rely on him in our weakness then, because he stood strong for us.

Hebrews 12 tells us that he endured from sinners such hostility against himself so that you may not grow weary or faint-hearted. Therefore, lift your drooping hands, strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet.

We can look to Christ, friends, and pray with Nehemiah, O our God, strengthen our hands, give us strength, and so like him, refuse to stop God's work in self-defense.

But the enemies are not finished yet, because from verse 10, we see another fear tactic that they used to try to make Nehemiah flee God's work and sin.

[14:17] So verse 10, Nehemiah goes to visit a guy called Shemaiah, who we're to understand was a prophet. And now, Shemaiah's confined to his home, probably he was unwell, which would make us wonder, wouldn't it, why does he want Nehemiah to go to his house when he's not well enough to leave it?

Well, he has an important message for Nehemiah. Verse 10, let us meet together in the house of God within the temple. Let's close the doors, for they're coming to kill you. They are coming to kill you by night.

Now, it all sounds very holy, doesn't it, to go and hide in the temple, in God's house, especially when a prophet has told you that you should. But Nehemiah knows that hiding in the temple is not the same thing as taking refuge in the Lord.

I said, should such a man as I run away? And what man such as I could go into the temple and live? So, there's two ways that the plan doesn't add up, isn't it?

For a start, well, how would it look for the leader of God's restoration work to run away and haul up in a panic room? That would cause even more confusion and distress for God's people than if he'd been captured or killed.

[15:37] Right? If he's run away, why shouldn't we? But even then, there could be few places worse for him to hide than the temple. Because as he looks at himself in the round, Nehemiah knows that if hiding would be cowardly, well, hiding in the temple would be unspeakably arrogant.

It would actually be the opposite of trusting God because it would be trampling sin into his presence and saying, what are you going to do about it? See how grounded Nehemiah is.

Twice he refers to himself as such a man as I. The first time says he's not naive. Right? He's a leader with important work to do. The second time says neither is he proud.

He knows that he is a sinner and unfit to enter God's presence and live. In passing, that's such an important lesson I think for us to have as we carry out God's work.

For our self-perception, our self-understanding, neither to be too high but neither too low, but for our idea of ourselves to be rounded, to be accurate, to be fair and clear at a functional level.

[16:54] We need that to be able to make decisions and move forward on the basis that in Christ we are at one and the same time saints and sinners. Like Nehemiah, we all have gifts from the Lord.

We also all have spiritual flaws. And it's that self-awareness, isn't it, that frees Nehemiah to see the way forward clearly.

For both these reasons, he says, I cannot go in. Even death threats against him don't tempt him to flee God's work and sin.

Nehemiah's reply reminds me of Daniel's friends. The king of Babylon told them to bow down to a golden statue of him or they'd be thrown in a furnace. What did they say?

Our God, who we serve, is able to deliver us from the burning, fiery furnace. But even if he doesn't, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you've set up.

[17:58] Whether we live or die, they say, we will not sin on your command. Our allegiance is to the Lord, not powers on earth. The early Christians had the same choice put before them in Rome.

There are stories of those who were told, you only have to kneel before this statue. Just kneel at this shrine, kiss this image, and you don't have to face the arena.

And some did give in, but the stories that we still have are of those who refused to do that and chose to be burned at the stake or torn apart by animals rather than to sin against the Lord.

Of course, Christ himself faced the same choice. Bow down to me, said the devil, and you can have all the kingdoms of the earth in their glory. When Jesus knew that his path to the crown was through the cross.

But what if you could do just this one thing, Jesus, this one little thing, and have the crown without the cross? What did he say? Be gone, Satan. It is written, you shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.

[19:12] Nehemiah's enemies are more bark than bite, aren't they? But when given the choice between sinning and suffering, he too chose to suffer. What man such as I could go into the temple and live?

Better to die at the hands of Sambalat, Geshem, and Tobiah than to die because I've sinned and wronged God. I wonder, brothers and sisters, when are we tempted to sin under pressure?

When we're put on the spot, perhaps at school, at uni, at work, what did you do on Sunday? Oh, you're a Christian. I've got a question for you. What do we choose when we're tempted to hide our faith out of shame rather than make disciples of all nations?

Do we run away and hide? Or do we speak for the Lord Jesus, come what may? Or perhaps it's being part of that church which teaches this, so we're tempted maybe to be a little bit vague, a bit apologetic about the bits of the Bible we find difficult.

Or maybe to find another less embarrassing church which soft-pedals the hard stuff rather than to be part of and to build up a church which plainly teaches the truth of God's Word.

[20:29] How do we know what's the right thing to do in those situations? How do we not compromise? Well, I think Nehemiah would say, be careful who you listen to. How does he know not to do what Shemiah said?

Verse 12, I understood and saw, he says, that God had not sent him but he pronounced the prophecy against me because of Tobiah and Sambalat. He might be a prophet by name but did Shemiah's words line up with what God says?

Well, no, says Nehemiah, it didn't. Only God gets to see who comes into the temple and I'm not one of them. God says this, this guy says that, who should I listen to?

I guess that's how he worked out that God hadn't sent Shemiah because God doesn't contradict his own word and he has a good idea who had sent him because it lines up exactly with their agenda. For this purpose he was hired that I would be afraid.

There it is again. sin and act in this way and sin so they could give me a bad name to taunt me. And we find out as well in verse 14 that wasn't a one-off.

[21:37] Nehemiah prays about the prophetess Nehemiah and the rest of the prophets who wanted to make me afraid. Nehemiah had lots of voices contradicting God in his life.

Who do we listen to when we're not sure what to do? Our lives are at stake, perhaps our reputation, our security. Who do we trust to guide us in those times?

Well, surely it is those who will bring us back to God's word and tell us what he says, not what they think, their agenda, somebody else's agenda. We should be careful, brothers and sisters, shouldn't we, not to believe everyone who claims to speak in the name of the Lord, but like the people of Berea in Acts who listen to Paul's preaching and they carefully search the scriptures to see whether it was true.

And we should be especially careful to do that, shouldn't we, when what we're being told tickles our ears? You're funny, isn't it, how it's so much easier to believe something that is convenient for us, that we want to hear, rather than something which is hard or makes life more difficult for us.

You know, I'm sure at a very human level, Nehemiah wished, wished that he could run and hide. And here is a prophet, apparently of God, telling him that that's what he should do.

[23:01] How easy would it have been to believe that, to do that? But the question at the top of his mind was, well, what does God say? Not do I want, what do I want to hear?

Writing for the last time to Timothy, Paul spurs him on in the Lord's work with these words. Fan into flame the gift of God, he says, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God gave us a spirit not of fear, but of power and love and self-control.

Let's not step, brothers and sisters, into this new week in a spirit of fear, of worry, of listening to those other voices. Rather, in faith, let's fan our gifts into flame as the Lord Jesus gives us power and love and self-control to continue in his work and in his way.

When we are afraid, we do not flee God's work and we do not sin against him. That's the biggest part of our passage and therefore our time this morning.

But there is one other time that Nehemiah speaks about fear which we haven't spotted yet. and it leaves us on a more hopeful note, I think, for where this is all going. So, our final point then, when God's work triumphs, who then is afraid?

[24:28] We read verse 15, so the wall was finished on the 25th day of the month of Elul in 52 days. Now, this is a massive moment in Nehemiah.

If you've been with us up to this point, maybe this is the bit that you've been waiting for. The wall is done. But we hardly press pause, do we? Why no celebration? Well, here's the real news, verse 16.

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.

We're to remember, aren't we, that they weren't building a wall for the sake of building a wall. They were building a wall for God's glory. And this is the bit Nehemiah wants to leave us with, that despite the enemy's best efforts to make God's people fear, in the end, it is them who are afraid because God's prayerful people kept building up with the help of our God.

God's prayerful It's only once the wall's done that the enemies properly realize, don't they, who they've been fighting against, not, quote, these feeble Jews, but the God of heaven, the Lord, who is great and awesome and who fights for his people.

[25 : 48] And once that penny had dropped, the enemies were humbled. Last week, we saw in chapter 5, it was all about the fear of the Lord and how a high view of God shaped his people's relationships on the ground.

We can still actually see those threads pulling through, can't we, as we see how Nehemiah dealt with his fears. But here that fear of the Lord lands on the enemies themselves. They are brought low as the Lord is lifted high in their worldview.

They wanted to be feared, didn't they? But now they know who really is to be feared, the faithful God who helps his people. And now I doubt this morning that there are many of us here who want to see churches fail and close and Christians be hiding in fear.

If that is you, you're really welcome. I'm glad that you're here. Please know, please know that there will always be a church on earth because this is the one who is really building it.

It is not a human institution built for human power or prestige or glory. It's the church of the living God. And it grows and builds with his help and his power and for his glory.

[27 : 10] And if that's you here today and you find yourself sitting among hundreds of his worshiping people, well, let that humble you. Be humbled by what you see.

This church is being built up with the help of our God. But there might be a few more of us today who even if you don't want to see the church fail, you wouldn't stick around yourself to see the work finished if it turned rotten.

Right? It's nice to see people in church, but you know, if the cost goes up of being here, whether that's socially, reputationally, you suffer for that, or politically, the police come knocking, well, you know, there are other things to live for.

There's other places to be on a Sunday. There's other things to call myself than a Christian. But friends, the humbling of verse 16 is only the lightest foreshadowing of a day when not only the walls of Jerusalem, but the church of Christ on earth is completed.

When the great commission is accomplished, when all God's people are gathered in and the Lord Jesus Christ himself returns to dwell with us, not in any earthly Jerusalem, but in the heavenly new Jerusalem.

[28 : 26] On that day, we're told there will be a great humbling. Every knee will bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

Friends, do not wait until that day to see where history is going. Don't wait until the finish line to see that that is where it will end. Instead, know that it is coming, see that it will be completed, and live for that day.

If the nations had known that these walls would have ever been finished, would they have thought so little of the God who his people worshipped and relied upon? There might be fear to come.

There's more fear to come in Nehemiah. But through the fear, there is a finish line. The work will be finished, the world will be humbled, and God will get the glory. Friends, which side of the wall will you be on on that day?

Let's keep going. Let's keep going to the finish line. Don't run away. Don't hide when it gets tough. But let's together put our strength, put our faith in the Lord for his strength.

[29 : 35] Let's hold the line and press on to the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let's pray for that now. Let's pray. Father, we thank you that what you've begun you will bring to completion on the day of Jesus Christ.

Lord, we confess that in the days in between, we feel great fear, anxiety, and worry. Lord, in our heart of hearts, we wonder if what you've promised will come to pass.

And Lord, our vision is overtaken by what's right in front of us and the threats, the intimidation that we fear each day. Father, we pray that you would by your spirit lift our eyes to see where you're taking this world and where you're taking your church.

And help us, we pray, to be wholeheartedly committed to it. Lord, help us not to be afraid. And when we are afraid, Lord, help us not to run in fear or to hide, but to find strength in you to carry on.

Keep us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.