

NEHEMIAH

Part 5: “Overcoming Fear”

Nehemiah 6:1–16

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Sunday, October 17, 2021 (Ordinary Time)

Scripture Reading

“Now when Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies heard that I had built the wall and that there was no breach left in it (although 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 at Hakkephirim in the plain of Ono.’ But they intended to do me harm. And 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 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 these reports you wish to become their king. And you have also set up prophets to proclaim concerning you in Jerusalem, ‘There is a king in Judah.’ And now the king will hear of these reports. So now come and let us take counsel together.’ Then I sent to him, saying, ‘No such things as you say have been done, for 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. Now when I went into the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, son of Mehetabel, who was confined to his home, he said, ‘Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple. Let us close the doors of the temple, for they are coming to kill you. They are coming to kill you by night.’ But I said, ‘Should such a man as I run away? And what man such as I could go into the temple and live? I will not go in.’ And I understood and saw that God had not sent him, but he had pronounced the prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. For this purpose he was hired, that I should be afraid and act in this way and sin, and so they could give me a bad name in order to taunt me. Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God, according to these things that they did, and also the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who wanted to make me afraid. 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” (Nehemiah 6:1–16, ESV).

This is God’s word.

Introduction and Review

Nehemiah is a story about God's people uniting together to accomplish something extraordinary, even in a time of great brokenness. It is one of the most inspiring and memorable stories of revival and restoration in all of Scripture.

Now that we are roughly at a midpoint in this book, let's briefly review what we have learned so far.

Prior to the time of our story, God's people were in exile due to their disobedience toward God. But recently, the kings of Persia allowed the Jewish people to return to their ancient homeland—the Promised Land.

But the city of Jerusalem is lying in shambles. The walls remain broken. The gates remain burned by fire. As a result, the people are exposed and vulnerable to abuse and attack.

A Jewish man in the Persian government, named Nehemiah, happens to hear about the brokenness of Jerusalem and is moved to tears. He then fasts, prays, and—at great risk to himself—requests and receives permission from the king of Persia to rebuild the city walls.

He goes to Jerusalem, studies the city, casts the vision for restoration to the people, and they get to work. Although Nehemiah runs into a little trouble from some outside enemies and internal sin within God's people, he, nevertheless, fearlessly leads the people of Jerusalem, and they restore the walls.

During our study of this book, we have explored the story of Nehemiah and applied it to our own lives as the people of God. We have seen how God has given us a mission to serve our city and to faithfully bear witness to the kingdom of Jesus.

And, we have also seen, when we seek to join God in his mission, we will be opposed in various ways. External spiritual attack will try to stop us. Even our own internal sin will try to stop us. This week, we will look at another threat to our call as the people of God—and that is *fear*.

The Problem of Fear

Fear is one of the most powerful motivating emotions of your life. There are, sadly, many people who inhabit their lives motivated almost completely out of fear. Fear can motivate everything from debilitating phobias, to divisive conspiracy theories, to self-destructive paranoia.

Fear is so powerful that there have been several cases in history where evil, authoritarian figures have risen to unbelievable power simply by being able to control people through fear. Tyrants like Hitler, Stalin, Mao Zedong, and Saddam Hussein were all able to amass great power by harnessing fear as a weapon.

And the reason that I use the example of tyrants in regards to fear is that I want you to see that when fear has a role in your life, it is a *tyrannical* role. Fear wants to rule you ruthlessly. If you obey your fear, then it promises to bless you. If you disobey your fear, it threatens to punish you. It is almost as if your fears are able to take on a personality themselves—and it is because they do.

Moreover, often our fears create self-fulfilling prophecies by leading us to make decisions that draw us closer to the very things we dread.

Now some fear is natural. It is okay to be afraid and sense fear when you are standing on the edge of a cliff or driving through a blizzard. We might call that type of natural, life-preserving fear “prudence” (cf. Prov 8:12). However, when a toxic form of fear begins to *control* you, it means that something has happened in your life spiritually.

God has invited us into another way. He has invited us into a better way; a life of flourishing without the dictatorship of fear. His word tells us, “*for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control*” (2 Tim 1:7). His word tells us “[*God’s*] perfect love casts out all fear” (1 John 4:18). Throughout Scripture there are 364 specific commandments to “*Fear not.*”

So, while God is holy and just and sovereign, and while he is worthy of a “holy fear,” the gospel is unique in the fact that it does not motivate us primarily by fear or anxiety. Rather, the gospel motivates us to fulfill our mission by faith-generated courage. And our text gives us a brilliant picture of what that courage looks like in real life.

So, today, we will be taking a deeper look into what God’s word teaches us about “*Overcoming Fear.*” In this text, we see that through the gospel, we can have deep, abiding courage in the midst of our three greatest fears: 1.) *the fear of rejection*, 2.) *the fear of failure*, and 3.) *the fear of death*.

Exposition

1.) Overcoming the Fear of Rejection

Nehemiah’s enemies are flabbergasted that despite all of their taunts and threats, Nehemiah’s mission has managed to go forward. Let’s look back at our text: “*Now when Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies heard that I had built the wall and that there was no breach left in it (although 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 at Hakkephirim in the plain of Ono.’ But they intended to do me harm*” (Neh 6:1–2).

Here, we learn that all of the walls have been restored. All that needs to be done is for the people of Jerusalem to hang the gates and the doors. Thus, Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem come at Nehemiah with a last-ditch effort to ruin his mission. And this time, they are going to attack him *personally*.

They begin by sending invitations to Nehemiah to meet with them. Now, remember these are men who have jeered at Nehemiah and his mission. These are men who thought his plan was doomed for failure, and they couldn't wait to see him humiliated. They even threatened an attack against the city of Jerusalem. Nehemiah's story is peppered by the petty little actions of these petty little men.

But now, since the restoration of Jerusalem is succeeding, they are pretending like they want to act civil. The subtext of their invitation to Nehemiah is, "Look, I know we've had our differences, but let's talk things out."

In reality, however, they just want to get Nehemiah off the wall. They are still conniving ways to create more drama and perhaps even attempt to kill him. And they think their little plan will work. In their mind, after all, they are very important men who have been rulers in the region. So, surely, they think, Nehemiah would trip all over himself to meet with them to clear up all the mean things they think about him.

This is why Nehemiah's response infuriates them: *"And 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?'"* (Neh 6:3). He basically tells them, *"My mission from God is important. You are not. No, I will not be meeting with you."*

When Sanballat and his crew try to distract Nehemiah by setting up a meeting with him, they are trying to not only distract Nehemiah from his task, *they are trying to get Nehemiah to give them a place of authority in his life.* They want Nehemiah to be distracted from his mission by needing their approval. They want Nehemiah to obey them and be influenced by them. They want Nehemiah to *fear* their rejection.

But Nehemiah knows better. Nehemiah knows, as the book of Proverbs says, *"The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is safe"* (Prov 29:25).

Many of us are all too aware of the tyranny that the fear of man can hold over our lives. Maybe we are really social, and we want to be accepted by friends more than anything else in the world. Maybe we are helpless romantics, and we want a boyfriend or a girlfriend, a husband or a wife to give us love. Whatever the case, when we make the acceptance of others our idol, it leads to the fear of rejection controlling us. When this is the case, you will find yourself making moral compromises because you want acceptance more than you want righteousness. You will drink too much, go places you shouldn't go, befriend people you shouldn't befriend, and compromise in your thoughts, words, and deeds—not because you hate God—but because you would rather have acceptance from people than nearness to him. But when you serve the idol of approval, it will inevitably fail you over and over again.

Several years ago, my wonderful wife saw something in this passage that made me laugh. When Sanballat and Geshem want Nehemiah to come to them, they ask him to come to the field of "Ono." So too, you can either be on the wall (and on mission), or you can be in the fear-driven place of "O no! What if that person doesn't like me!"

The big idea is this: you can't be on mission for God and be led by fear at the same time.

Because you can never really love people if you are afraid of them and constantly derive your validation from them.

But when we allow the gospel to realign our hearts to where God is God and people are people, we can truly be freed of the fear of rejection and be released into being able to love as we are called to love (Ps 118:8–9).

God is great and glorious. He is the most significant being in the universe, and if you are his child, you have nothing to gain from the approval of other people because his approval really is enough.

When God looks upon you who are in Christ, he neither sees your attempts at perfection nor your sin. Rather, he sees the perfection of his Son. He freely gives you an approval you cannot lose, but you never earned it in the first place!

2.) Overcoming the Fear of Failure

After Sanballat and company continue to try to get Nehemiah off the wall several more times with no success (Neh 6:4), they up the ante. Sanballat produces an open letter that is read out loud to Nehemiah publicly before the citizens of Jerusalem.

Look back at the text: *"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 these reports you wish to become their king. And you have also set up prophets to proclaim concerning you in Jerusalem, 'There is a king in Judah.' And now the king will hear of these reports. So now come and let us take counsel together'"* (Neh 6:5–7).

The content of the letter is a vicious accusation of treason. Sanballat says that Nehemiah is a self-promoting manipulator that is trying to lead Jerusalem into rebellion and make himself king. He says that Nehemiah has hired prophets to falsely prophesy that Nehemiah is God's chosen king. This, Sanballat says, is the real reason that Nehemiah has rebuilt the wall. Moreover, Sanballat, being the loyal citizen that he is, will tell the king that this has been Nehemiah's plan all along unless Nehemiah goes and talks to Sanballat. Now the motivation behind this is evil and manipulative.

The goal of Sanballat's tactic is to create fear that the Persians would attack the city of Jerusalem for rebellion. If this were true, that meant all the work on the wall would have been done in vain. If the people of Jerusalem believed this, they would drop their hands and succumb to the paralysis of the fear of failure. As Nehemiah says, *"For they all wanted to frighten us, thinking, 'Their hands will drop from the work, and it will not be done'"* (Neh 6:9a).

But rather than falling for this ploy and being paralyzed by fear, Nehemiah prays for strength and continues to fearlessly work. He prays, “*But now, O God, strengthen my hands*” (Neh 6:9b).

In the same way, especially in our culture, it is very easy to make an idol out of success. Because of this, it is easy to be controlled by a fear of failure. This fear is marked by a constant chasing of the next achievement. Like Pharaoh of old, this idol is a harsh taskmaster. It will never let you rest. You will always be anxious.

The fear of failure might make you act pridefully because you don’t want anyone else to think you are a failure by being weak and vulnerable. As in the case of our text, the fear of failure might make you act cowardly because you would rather not even try instead of trying and then failing. The fear of failure might make you work to the point where you ultimately lose your family or friendships because you never take the time to love and value people. You feel like you always have to work. You have to achieve, or else you feel worthless. It is a dangerous and deadly road to go down.

But Nehemiah is courageous, even in the prospect of his failure. His strength is not in himself but the Lord. If Nehemiah were pursuing success by worldly standards, he would have stayed in his cushy job as the emperor’s cup-bearer/bar-tender. He would have stayed in the comfort of the capital city of the empire, where he worked in the very throne room of the king!

Instead, Nehemiah chooses to work for the restoration of a broken, impoverished, and forgotten city. But Nehemiah is not living for worldly success. He is living in obedience to God’s mission. In other words, his life is not measured by what he has achieved. His life is valuable because it is part of the masterful mosaic that is God’s redemption of the broken world. You can’t be afraid of failure if your life is dedicated to obeying the King of the Universe. In the Kingdom of God, success is not determined by your *fruitfulness* but by your *faithfulness*.

Are you being faithful with what God has called you to, or are you seeking something more? Have you placed your identity in Christ, or are you placing your identity and worth in your accomplishments?

You need to know—if you have placed your trust in Jesus—the most important truth about you lies not in what you have or haven’t achieved. Your ultimate value is secure in what Christ has accomplished on your behalf! He lived a perfectly righteous life for you! He took the judgment of death upon himself for you! He rose again in victory for you!

Nothing you can do can top the work of Christ, and nothing you can do can take away from it. This truth liberates us from the debilitating and destructive fear of failure.

3.) Overcoming the Fear of Death

You would think, after that last stunt, the drama would be over. But Sanballat and his men continue to fight dirty.

They hire a man named Shemaiah, who is apparently a false, mercenary prophet in Jerusalem, to utter a false prophesy against Nehemiah in hopes that Nehemiah would make a mistake and sin against God.

Nehemiah comes over to Shemaiah's house, and Shemaiah tells Nehemiah that he should hide in the temple of God because there is an assassination plot against him (Neh 6:10). Nehemiah automatically rejects this prophecy for two reasons. Firstly, Nehemiah has been sent with the approval of Artaxerxes (the King of Persia), and more importantly, the power of God (the King of Kings). He has no need to cower down. He is a man of courage. Look at verse 11: **"But I said, 'Should such a man as I run away?'" (Neh 6:11a).**

Secondly, Nehemiah knows that it would be a sin for him, as one who is not a priestly Levite, to enter into the inner sanctuary of God's house: **"And what man such as I could go into the temple and live? I will not go in" (Neh 6:11b).** Simply said, Nehemiah refuses to sin against his great God because he is afraid of little men.

Interestingly, Nehemiah comes to understand that this prophecy was a ruse only after he rejects it (Neh 6:12). He understands that this was a ploy to make him act cowardly and sinfully so that he could be further opposed by his enemies. But Nehemiah simply refuses to be led by fear—even the fear of death.

Fear of death is the most basic, primordial fear that we have. This is the fear that all of us will face—the haunting reality of our own mortality.

Nehemiah has no qualms with taking wise precautions, like arming the people for battle or setting a watch on the wall. But refuses to be paralyzed by the fear of death.

Nehemiah is courageous. But his courage is not derived from his talent, might, or arrogant bravado. Nehemiah's courage is derived from him being absolutely convinced of two truths. He is convinced of his calling. And he is convinced that his God is mighty! Therefore, he will not bow to fear—even for the sake of self-preservation.

In the life of the Apostle Paul, we see a New Testament example of how to have courage in the presence of this fear. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul taunts the fear of death when he says, **"For me to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Phil 1:21).** How is this possible? Paul overcomes his fear of death because death means he is going to get to be with Jesus! For most of the world, death is the ultimate fear. But for Paul death is a gain because it is the doorway to unbroken union with Jesus who *is* the ultimate gain. The same can be true for you!

The gospel is good news not just because it claims that it is going to give us a happier, more meaningful life. The gospel is good news because it claims that this life is not the end of the story. We get to live forever with Jesus. I promise you this: Heaven is not a place filled with people who are merely scared of hell; heaven is a place filled with people who love Jesus.

Let your heart be filled with this hope; the hope of seeing the face of the one who saves you. Let's not be satisfied with a few sporadic spiritual experiences in this life. May our hope be to abide in God's presence forever. How could you ever truly be led by fear if this is your unshakable hope?

Conclusion

At the end of our passage, we see that Nehemiah succeeds and his enemies fail: *"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"* (Neh 6:15–16).

The wall is rebuilt in only fifty-two days, which is remarkable considering that it had laid destroyed for multiple decades. And rather than Nehemiah being afraid, it is Nehemiah's enemies who are now afraid. They recognize that they have not been opposing a man, but rather, they have opposed and been overcome by God himself.

Fear is a real emotion. It is something that we all deal with, and I am not in any way trying to encourage you to overcome fear by ignoring or minimalizing it. Rather, I want to challenge you to confront your fear in light of who God is and who he has revealed himself to be through Jesus. I want to encourage you to build up your faith in such a way that your faith in God outweighs your fear of anything else.

It is somewhat ironic to say this now, but my greatest fear really used to be public speaking. One of my most enduring idols was, and at times continues to be, fear of rejection. So, I viewed public speaking as a terrible opportunity to potentially look stupid in front of a lot of people. Now, when I shared that aspect of my life to people, they will often ask me how I overcame my fear of public speaking. And I always say, "It is not that I fear people less; it is that I came to be more amazed with Jesus more than I fear people. I want people to know Jesus; therefore, I can tell them about Jesus without fear."

We have access to the approval, the love, and the life of our God because when we were in rebellion, Jesus endured our greatest fears. He endured the rejection of the people he came to serve and save. He was, by all standards of worldly success, a failure. He never owned property, never held political office, and never wrote a book. He even endured the death of a criminal—a horrendous death on a cross—in our place. He took our fears and let them do their worst to him, so that through his substitutionary sacrifice and his victorious resurrection, he might give us access to union with God.

If you are a Christian, let your heart be stirred by the Holy Spirit to wonder at the costly grace that has brought you into communion with such a great God that frees you from all your fears.

If you are not yet a Christian, I invite you to repent of your sin and begin to worship Jesus today that you may find freedom from your fear too!

Courage is not the absence of fear. Courage is obeying Jesus in the presence of fear. Courage is not letting fear control who you are, what you do, or who you become.

So, Redeemer Christian Church, may we be a people who submit our fears to Jesus. May we be those who have our eyes open to the reality of God's glory, God's love, and God's power over even death. And, in light of those truths, may we be bold and courageous in our call and our mission, as the people of God.

AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities

- 1.) *Read Nehemiah 6:1–16 and summarize the major events in this story in your own words.*
- 2.) *Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem try to motivate Nehemiah by fear several times in this passage. What are the specific things they do to attempt to get Nehemiah to respond in fear?*
- 3.) *In what ways are you most tempted to be motivated by fear? In this Sunday's sermon, we discussed fear of rejection, fear of failure, and the fear of death. Which one of these fears is most challenging for your spiritual life?*
- 4.) *How does the truth of the gospel speak directly to your fears? What truths of the gospel do you need to remind yourself of when you feel tempted by fear?*