

Neh 6:1-19 – Colin Spackman

One of my favourite T.V shows is the show “Grand Designs”. The U.K version, for those who were wondering. And in each episode, the show follows a guest as they go about designing and then building their dream home.

I reckon I’m about 25 years too young to be in the show’s target demographic. But there’s lots to enjoy. The blocks of land that people build on are usually in beautiful parts of the world. And as the name of the show suggests, the houses that people make often are pretty spectacular.

But the part of the show that I like the most is actually the fairly predictable structure that almost every episode follows. And if you’ve seen the show, then you might know what I mean.

At the start of the episode, the host asks the guests the same two questions: (1) What’s your budget? and (2) How long do you think it’s going to take? He then informs them that their budget is too small, and that their time frame is too optimistic. And then you get to sit back and watch as everything goes wrong. And then, at the end of the episode, the host sits the guest down and says to them “I told you so”. It’s even been turned into a meme.

And in a kind of cruel way, it is fun to watch. The guests are warned about what to expect. They’re told about the challenges they’ll face. They should know better. But you get to watch them be surprised and overwhelmed anyway.

And in some ways, that’s what the Book of Nehemiah is here to do for us. It’s here to give us warnings as we do God’s work in this world. And it’s here to teach us, so that we’re not caught off-guard when challenges come our way. And we need these lessons, because, as we’ve seen, you and I have been called to join in God’s building project. To help grow disciples of Jesus and build up his Church. And so, as we’ve read about the construction of this wall around the city of Jerusalem, we’ve been told about the different kinds of challenges that we should expect to face.

Think back to Chapter 4. There, the nations around Jerusalem were threatening to attack. And so, God’s people worked with bricks in one hand, swords in the other, trusting that God would fight for them (Neh. 4:17). We were told to expect opposition from those outside of God’s people. And last week, in Chapter 5, we saw that the nobles, the rich and the wealthy in Jerusalem, were exploiting the poor, selling them into slavery, and hindering the work that God had given them (Neh. 5:1-5). We were warned to expect opposition from inside God’s people.

And now, in Nehemiah 6, we see that external opposition, and that internal opposition, focus in on one person - Nehemiah, the leader and chief builder of God’s people. And what Nehemiah faces here, in our passage, is “intimidation”. The word is even repeated three times, just so we don’t miss it (Neh. 6:9, 13, 19). There’s intimidation from those outside God’s people. And there’s intimidation from those inside God’s people. But despite all of this opposition and intimidation, we see that Nehemiah perseveres until the work is complete.

And so, as we look at this passage together, we’re going to think about how we can learn from Nehemiah’s example. How we can persevere in the face of opposition. But we’re also going to think about how Nehemiah, the leader and chief builder of the wall, points us to Jesus, who, as we’ve heard, is the great builder of God’s Church.

We're going to look at our passage in two parts this morning. And the first part, in verses 1 to 9, shows us the external opposition that Nehemiah faced. Opposition that came from the nations surrounding Jerusalem.

And this opposition comes, in verses 1 and 2, right as this work on the wall nears completion. In Chapter 4, our last progress update, we saw that "the entire wall [was built] up to half its height" (Neh. 4:6). But now we're told that everything is finished except for the doors. Now, there were ten sets of gates around the city, so there's still work to be done. But Nehemiah and the people of God are on the home stretch.

And so, our old friends Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem the Arab - people who have opposed this project at every point - realise that they need to get moving. If they want to stop the construction of this wall, then they need to act quickly and decisively.

And these guys are strategic thinkers. So, they decide to focus all of their attention on the person who's been driving, and organizing, and sustaining this work: Nehemiah. They figure that if they can kill him, or discredit him, or intimidate him, then the work on the wall will come to a grinding halt. And so that's what they try to do.

In verses 2 to 4, they try to stop Nehemiah by applying persistent pressure. And this pressure comes in through a series of intimidating initiations. We read, in verse 2, that Sanballat and Geshem organise a kind of Global Peace Summit. And they send a message to Nehemiah, inviting him to attend: "*Come, let's meet together in the villages of the Ono Valley*".

This seems like it will be a friendly chat. You know, "Let's just talk through our differences and to find a way forward". But really, it's not. We read in verse 2 that Nehemiah sees straight through this invitation. And he says that: "*They were planning to harm me*". Perhaps he was warned. Maybe it was just obvious. Personally, I think that the name gives it away. Nothing good can happen in the "Oh No! Valley". But Nehemiah knows that Sanballat and Geshem are trying to harm him and kill him. And so, he turns down the invitation.

But that's where this persistent pressure begins. We read, in verse 4, that "*four [more] times they sent [Nehemiah] the same proposal*". "Come, Nehemiah"; "Meet us, Nehemiah"; "We can figure this all out"; but all with the intention of doing him harm. And you can imagine the anxiety that would cause. The stress that would bring. This persistent invitation to come and enter their trap. And they apply this persistent pressure to try and make Nehemiah shrink back from his work.

But Nehemiah refuses. And we'll think about how he does that in a moment. But next, we see that Sanballat decides to turn up the dial. He goes public. And he even threatens Nehemiah with political pressure. In verse 5, Sanballat sends a fifth invitation. But this time, there's a twist. Sanballat sends this message as an open letter in the hand of his messenger. It's there for everyone to see. Think a viral post, or a front-page article in the paper.

And look at what this message says:

"It is reported among the nations—and Geshem agrees—that you and the Jews plan to rebel. This is the reason you are building the wall. According to these reports, you are to become their king and have even set up the prophets in Jerusalem to proclaim on your behalf, "There is a king in Judah." These rumors will be heard by the king. So come, let's confer together."

Now, that message is full to the brim with threats and lies. And it continues to ramp up that feeling of pressure and intimidation.

The rumour that the message mentions, probably started by Sanballat himself, is that Nehemiah's building this wall for his own benefit. To set himself up as a king. And Sanballat says that if Nehemiah doesn't come and meet him - remember, with the intention of harming him - then this rumour might just happen to find its way to the ear of King Artaxerxes.

And it's a really vicious message. And it's a rumour that really could work. Back in the book of Ezra, which is just before Nehemiah, this same rumor was used to stop the work on the temple (Ezra 4:22). The enemies of God's people said that, if this was allowed to continue, it would lead to rebellion. And that threat stopped all construction work in the city for two whole years. So, this is not an empty threat.

And you can imagine how the King Artaxerxes - who's funded this project and sent Nehemiah to do the work - might have reacted if he heard this rumour. It could be taken as a betrayal of trust or a breaking of loyalty. If this rumour got to the king, then the work in Jerusalem, and Nehemiah's life, could be in danger.

But again, Nehemiah is able to see exactly what's happening. In verse 9, he says that *"they were all trying to intimidate us, saying, 'They will drop their hands from the work, and it will never be finished'".* Those outside of God's people apply persistent pressure. They use political leverage. But again, Nehemiah refuses to shrink back from his work.

And I think Nehemiah's situation is familiar to us. There's a persistent pressure not to be different, not to go on with the work God has given us. And there's even a lingering threat of political action if you say, or do, the wrong thing. But what keeps Nehemiah going in the face of this opposition? Well, I think there's at least three things that we can learn.

First, Nehemiah is realistic about the opposition he faces. I've enjoyed the different names that we've given to Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem. I think we've had "the troublesome trio" and "the band of unmerry men". They've been very good. But look at what Nehemiah calls them in verse 1: *"our enemies"*. And they are. Nehemiah knows that there are people who have set themselves against God, and have set themselves against God's people.

Nehemiah's realistic about his enemies. And I think that we need to be too. You see, we might not like it, but there are people around us who actively set themselves against God, and who actively set themselves against God's work. It could be in big ways. It could be in small ways. But they are there. And as we go about living as Christians, and building God's Church, we will face these enemies.

And so, we need to be realistic. We need to be ok with not being liked. We need to be ok when people say things about us that are just untrue. We need to be ok, as Stephen McAlpine puts it, with being "bad guys". And that's a great book if you want to think about that more. Our aim is not to be liked by everyone. But loving our enemies, and praying for those who persecute us, our aim is to get on with the work that God has given us to do.

Second, it's clear that part of what keeps Nehemiah going is his dedication to the work. I mean, look at his words in verse 3. In one sense, these words are his excuse to just get out of a meeting. But in another sense, they show us what it is that keeps him going. When faced with opposition, when tempted to shrink back, Nehemiah says: *"I am doing important work and cannot come down"*. Nehemiah's realistic about opposition. But even more than that, he is captured by the significance of the work that God has given him to do. And so, he refuses to stop, even for just a few days.

And so, I want to ask: Is that how you see the work that God has given you? Do you see growing followers of Jesus, and building God's Church, as that important? Because it is. Friends, you and I have been entrusted, under God, with the message of the gospel. That message is the difference between life and death; between hope and despair; between forgiveness and judgment. Has that gripped you? Do you see that as important?

And friends, you and I, under God, have even been entrusted with caring for one other, encouraging one another, and keeping one another going until the end. And that is huge. And if that grips you, if you see the importance of that work, then you will not stop, even when opposition comes.

And thirdly, at the end of verse 9, we see that Nehemiah prays. Just as he has done all throughout this book. Nehemiah is not the kind of person who just digs deep or just pushes through. He is someone who knows he's dependent on God, and expresses that dependence in prayer. He prays: *"But now, my God, strengthen my hands"*. And when we face opposition, we should pray for the same thing. Nehemiah warns us to expect opposition from those outside of God's people. And in the midst of that opposition, Nehemiah perseveres in the work that God has given him.

that Nehemiah faces doesn't just come from those outside of God's people. It also comes from those inside of God's people. Those who should be working with Nehemiah, and encouraging Nehemiah, start to oppose him as well. And we meet the first of these people in verse 10. There we see that Nehemiah goes to the house of Shemaiah, who is a prophet in Jerusalem. And he goes there, we can assume, to hear a word of God and to be encouraged in his work.

But instead, he gets this message:

*"Let's meet at the house of God,
inside the temple.
Let's shut the temple doors
because they're coming to kill you.
They're coming to kill you tonight!"*

Now, I know a couple who were serving, until very recently, as missionaries overseas. And they had to flee the country they were in, on a moment's notice, because they were told an angry mob was heading to their home. I can't even imagine how frightening that would be. But that's basically Shemaiah's message: "There are people trying to kill you! They're coming for you tonight! Nehemiah, you need to run". And Shemaiah even has a plan. He says that they should go and hide in the temple, perhaps even in the inner part of the temple reserved for the priests, so that they won't be found.

It would've been a frightening message to hear. But Nehemiah keeps a level head. And again, he sees through this prophecy. He realises that it's something that's intended for harm. He says, in verse 12 and 13, that *"God had not sent [Shemaiah]"* but that *"Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him"*. And they'd done this, he says, in order to frighten Nehemiah, to make Nehemiah sin by entering an off-limits part of the temple, and to discredit Nehemiah in the eyes of the people and ruin his reputation.

And at the end of Nehemiah's prayer in verse 14, we learn that this wasn't an isolated incident. Nehemiah names *"the prophetess Noadiah"* and a whole group of other prophets who have been trying to intimidate him as well. These prophets, who were meant to be speaking God's words, encouraging God's work, and supporting Nehemiah, have been bribed to try and bring him down.

And in verse 17 we learn that that's not all. There we see that *"the nobles of Judah"*, the same group who had been selling God's people as slaves, are undermining Nehemiah as well. They've decided, it turns out, to become pen-pal's with Nehemiah's enemy Tobiah - sending him letters, and receiving his letters. Nehemiah even says that many of these nobles *"were bound by oath"* to Tobiah, which is probably a reference to business deals that they had made. And even worse, Nehemiah tells us that Tobiah and his children had married their way into the nobility of Jerusalem.

And again, in verse 19, Nehemiah says that all of this just increased the pressure and intimidation he felt. The nobles kept *"mentioning Tobiah's good deeds"* to Nehemiah. But they also report everything that Nehemiah said back to Tobiah in their letters. Again, these leaders, who were meant to be supporting Nehemiah, encouraging Nehemiah, and joining him in the work, have started to oppose him because of their greed.

And in some ways, I think that this opposition from within God's people can be harder to take than the opposition from outside. On one level, we sort of expect people outside the Church to not understand what we're doing, or not to agree with what we are doing. But it's really hard when people inside the Church, who should be serving alongside us, actually start to hinder the work or to try and make it fail. But again, this is what Nehemiah is telling us we should expect.

Internal opposition is hard. But we can learn from how Nehemiah responds. I mean, think about what he doesn't do. He doesn't descend into infighting. He doesn't try to take things into his own hands. Instead, he entrusts the work, and he entrusts his enemies, into God's hands.

He says: *"My God, remember Tobiah and Sanballat for what they have done, and also the prophetess Noadiah and the other prophets who wanted to intimidate me."*

Often when we try to take things into our own hands, we get it really wrong. We go too far. We falsely accuse. We might burn bridges and damage relationships. But here, Nehemiah shows us how to respond when people inside the Church hinder the work God has given us. Nehemiah trusts that God will sort it out.

And God can answer the kind of prayer that Nehemiah prays in two ways. He can either forgive these enemies and draw them to himself - like he did with the Apostle Paul. Or he will remember the wrong that they've done, and he will deal with them in his perfect justice. When faced with this internal opposition, Nehemiah entrusts himself, his work, and his enemies, to God. And he keeps persevering in the work that God has given him.

Nehemiah faces opposition from outside God's people. And from inside God's people. But he keeps building. And he perseveres, in verses 15 and 16, until the work is complete. And when the work is complete, the great wall around Jerusalem is finished, we see that two really important things happen.

The first that happens is that the nations, the same nations who have been trying to intimidate Nehemiah, are shocked and lose their confidence. In fact, the people who have been trying to intimidate Nehemiah, find themselves intimidated and afraid.

And second that happens is that, when the walls are finished, everybody "*realises that this task had been accomplished by our God*". And has been, hasn't it? I mean, that's what we've seen throughout these first six chapters. It was God who heard Nehemiah's prayer (Neh. 1:4-11). It was God who opened the door for the work to begin (Neh. 2:8). And it was remembering the Lord (Neh. 4:14) and fearing the Lord (Neh. 5:9) that kept the builders going.

And now, in an incredible 52 days, this nearly 4-kilometer-long wall has been finished. And let me just tell you that's quicker than any Grand Designs project I have seen. And all of that testifies to the fact that God has done it. Above, and behind, and through the efforts of his people, God has finished this great work. And as for Nehemiah, he persevered in the face of opposition until this work was complete.

But as we finish, we need to recognise that, whilst you and I can learn from Nehemiah and his example, we are not Nehemiah. We have our moments, don't we, where we participate in God's work. But so often we're distracted, hesitant, and afraid as we go about building God's Church. So often when we face opposition, from inside or from outside, we shrink back from the work that God has given us.

We can learn from Nehemiah, but we're not Nehemiah. And that's because Nehemiah, the leader and chief builder of this wall, is there to point us to Jesus, the great builder of God's Church. You see, Jesus, like Nehemiah, gave himself to the work that God had given him. Jesus, like Nehemiah, didn't shrink back. Jesus, like Nehemiah, knew the importance of his work. And Jesus saw his work through to the end.

And Jesus faced that opposition from outside of God's people, and from inside God's people. It's not a coincidence that the false charge in Nehemiah, of being a rebellious rival king, is the exact same charge made against Jesus (Jn. 18:33-37). And it's not a coincidence that those who were closest to Jesus, who should have been encouraging him in his work and serving alongside him, betrayed him for money, just like the false prophet Shemaiah (Matt. 26:14-15).

Jesus faced external and internal opposition. And he persevered, even to the point of death. And as we heard in our reading from Matthew 16, it is the Lord Jesus, now risen and reigning, who is the great builder of God's Church.

Nehemiah, the great builder of the wall, points us to Jesus, the great builder of God's Church. And friends, that is good news for us. Because it's Jesus, the great builder, who takes our small efforts and our unimpressive efforts, which are so full of reluctance and fear. And he graciously uses them as part of his great work of building up his Church.

In the Lord Jesus we have a great builder who doesn't shrink back. Nothing will stop his work, not even the gates of Hades. And, brothers and sisters, in the gospel, you and I get to build under him.