

Great Expectations

Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

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Please turn with me in your Bibles to the sixth chapter of Nehemiah, Nehemiah 6. Move to this sixth chapter for the first time this morning, continuing our exposition of the books Ezra and Nehemiah.

The title of the message this morning is "Great Expectations." Great expectations. I borrowed the title from the work by Charles Dickens by that name in which essentially without going into too much detail about it, his story, great expectations are not met, that's the whole point of the story, that the main character, Pip, has a series of anticipations, expectations that he is looking to see realized and one after another they're not, and so that his expectations meet reality and they are dashed. And so, in a sense, it's presenting the danger of unrealistic expectations, the damage and harm that can come when we don't manage our expectations for the future, and this sixth chapter of Nehemiah, I think, calls us to something of that same consideration, the danger of unrealistic expectations because as we read the chapter, we're going to see that two reports come in the chapter that should be joyful, exciting reports. One in verse 1, the wall is completed without any breach except for the gates. Remember, we're talking about the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem, the walls of Jerusalem in the fifth century BC under the leadership of Nehemiah, the man who had been cupbearer to the king of Persia, but as a faithful Jew, has been moved by God to go back and to lead a return to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls, and they've been doing this against great opposition. The work was difficult enough in itself, I mean, the walls need to be rebuilt, he has no skilled labor, they're not a group of masons, brick masons ready to take on the work, it is just the everyday run-of-the-mill Jew who has returned from captivity. And not only are they having to rebuild the wall with unskilled labor, they're having to do it under the constant threat of imminent attack. They are having to divide their attention from this difficult project to defending their lives.

We've seen how in earlier chapters, particularly chapter 4, this was vividly clear with an image Nehemiah uses to say with one hand they built, the implements of building, in the other hand they held a sword. This was the way they built the wall and we're going to receive a report in this chapter that the wall is finished. As I mentioned in verse 1 it's going to say, it's finished except for the gates, and then in verse 15 we're going to hear that the wall is completely finished in record time; 52 days this ragtag group of returned

exiles rebuilds the wall around Jerusalem in the most unfavorable circumstances, 52 days, barely seven weeks.

So you think about that, you would expect that there would be some celebration in this chapter, some sense of victory and triumph in the chapter, at least a collective sigh of relief, the work is done. That's what we would expect. Isn't that what we would want also if we were there? The work has been hard, it's been grueling, it's finished. But that's not what you find in Nehemiah 6. Great expectations meet a harsh and painful reality. What we're going to see is that the focus of the chapter really is on the ongoing opposition even as the victory is being won, and that the opposition does not end after the victory is won so that there's a sense in which there's a hollowness to the victory, a shallowness to the joy. And I think we find in this the reality that we face in a fallen world, that in this fallen world every victory has an air of hollowness about it. There's a sense of shallowness to the joy, elusiveness to that sense of triumph. It slips away almost as quickly as we grasp it because we're not home yet, and this world is still under the reign of the god of this age who is opposed to the things of God.

So great expectations for the Christian should be focused completely and entirely on heaven and we should have realistic expectations for the days that we live in this world. That's, I think, what we're going to see as we read this chapter. I want you to, as we read, even think about as I just introduced, these two reports of apparent victory and then how the narrative flows from that. So Nehemiah 6:1,

1 Now when it was reported to Sanballat, Tobiah, to Geshem the Arab and to the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall, and that no breach remained in it, although at that time I had not set up the doors in the gates, 2 then Sanballat and Geshem sent a message to me, saying, "Come, let us meet together at Chephirim in the plain of Ono." But they were planning to harm me. 3 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 and come down to you?" 4 They sent messages to me four times in this manner, and I answered them in the same way. 5 Then Sanballat sent his servant to me in the same manner a fifth time with an open letter in his hand. 6 In it was written, "It is reported among the nations, and Gashmu says, that you and the Jews are planning to rebel; therefore you are rebuilding the wall. And you are to be their king, according to these reports. 7 You have also appointed prophets to proclaim in Jerusalem concerning you, 'A king is in Judah!' And now it will be reported to the king according to these reports. So come now, let us take counsel together." 8 Then I sent a message to him saying, "Such things as you are saying have not been done, but you are inventing them in your own mind." 9 For all of them were trying to frighten us, thinking, "They will become discouraged with the work and it will not be done." But now, O God, strengthen my hands. 10 When I entered the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, son of Mehetabel, who was confined at home, 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, and they are coming to kill you at night." 11 But I said, "Should a man like me flee? And could one such as I go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in." 12 Then I perceived that surely God had not sent him, but he uttered his prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. 13 He was hired for this reason, that I might become frightened and act accordingly and sin, so that they might have an evil report in order that they could reproach me. 14 Remember, O my God, Tobiah and Sanballat according to these works of theirs, and also Noadiah the prophetess and the rest of the prophets who were trying to frighten me. 15 So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. 16 When all our enemies heard of it, and all the nations surrounding us saw it, they lost their confidence; for they recognized that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God. 17 Also in those days many letters went from the nobles of Judah to Tobiah, and Tobiah's letters came to them. 18 For many in Judah were bound by oath to him because he was the son-in-law of Shecaniah the son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah. 19 Moreover, they were speaking about his good deeds in my presence and reported my words to him. Then Tobiah sent letters to frighten me.

Do you hear how that, it ends on the note 52 days, this is record time, God did a miracle and yet it ends on the note, "Tobiah is still sending letters to frighten me." So expectations meet reality.

Let's go to the Lord and ask his blessing on his word.

Father, we come now to ask You, Lord, to grant us by the Holy Spirit the power of the Holy Spirit to see and understand wonderful things in Your law, that in Your light we might see light, that we might see the glory of God in the face of Christ. We pray this for Your pleasure and Your honor and we pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.

All right, so great expectations, the problem and the damage that comes when we have unrealistic expectations. What I want to do is gather our thoughts around two main points this morning and the first is, I want us to look carefully at the flow of the narrative. That's the first point, the flow of the narrative. We're just going to try to really spend some time observing how Nehemiah presents to us what he does and the way that he does it. So the flow of the narrative, and I want to, again, remind you that there are two key points of relative victory here. Verse 1, for Nehemiah to recount that they have got the walls finished, they haven't got the gates but they've got the walls finished, there's no breach in it all around Jerusalem. That is a great report. That's in verse 1. It's an apparent victory. Then in verse 15, we have the final complete victory, the wall was completed on the 25th of the month of Elul in 52 days, and then to watch how we see that the follow-up to that.

So here we go in verse 1 we have the first report, "it was reported to Sanballat, Tobiah, to Geshem the Arab and to the rest of our enemies." The enemies hear what God is doing

and they respond. They hear that it's nearly done, the wall is almost completed, I mean, they are at the threshold of completing the wall and the enemies rather than just give up, they intensify their efforts. Sanballat and Geshem send a message, "Hey, come, let us meet together. Let's just have, it's an invitation to diplomacy. We know our relationship got off on a bad foot, Nehemiah, but let's meet." And the place that he mentions, the plain of Ono, is midway between Jerusalem and Samaria. It's actually believed by scholars to still be in the realm of Judah that Nehemiah is governing but at the very northernmost extreme. So under the pretext of wanting to meet and to just work out their differences to talk about a path forward, they extend this invitation. Nehemiah then gives us his discernment about the circumstances, "They were planning to harm me." Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit he writes that and so clearly they were, and when we think about it in context of what we've already read, wouldn't you have been suspect of any kind of invitation from these guys already?

So Nehemiah responds to the message and his response is something in itself. "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?'" I'm not going to come down from Jerusalem to meet you. I'm doing a great work. But that's not enough. These guys send the same message three more times, it's four times total. I mean, can you imagine that? They send a message, he sends it back, and in Hebrew it actually when it says in verse 4, "They sent messages to me four times in this manner and I answered them in the same way," it basically says "according to the same words." They send the same message and I sent the same exact message back. They send the same message, "Hey, come, let's meet." And I send them back, "I am doing a great work and I cannot come down." They send the message again. "I am doing a great work and I cannot come down." They send the message a fourth time. "I am doing a great work and I cannot come down." You would have thought three times was enough but four times isn't enough. Rather than accept this, Sanballat tries another tactic. He sends his servant with an open letter. This is an insidious and just evil trick. Basically he sends this letter, listen, and the idea is, "We're trying to help you, Nehemiah." And just watch how evil works and understand that the architect of this conspiracy is still alive and well and at work in the world today.

So he says to Nehemiah, "Listen, there's a report going around." I wonder where that report started? Somebody can say, "I've been hearing some things about you," because they're the ones that have been talking about you. "I heard myself when I said it. Some things are going around about you that you actually are rebuilding the wall because you and the Jews are planning to rebel, and that you're going to be the king. You've actually got prophets ready to do what," as you read through like Samuel and Kings, when a new king would be installed, the prophet would say, Samuel actually anointed Saul, then David, and then the prophets would tend to hail the next king. And so, "You've appointed prophets to say, 'Here's the King, Nehemiah.'" And then he says, "And now it will be reported to the King." That "King" is talking about the King of Persia "Hey, listen, I'm trying to help you out, Nehemiah. Word is going to get back to the King that you are planning to be a king." You know, and this would have been a powerful, it would have been a real powerful resonance about this threat, the reality of this threat.

It's been a long time when we were back in Ezra 4 and some of you may remember that in Ezra 4, that's describing the first return of the Jews. Remember, the return that happened under Zerubbabel when they went back in 538 BC about 90 years before this? They went back from Babylon in Persia to Jerusalem and they're rebuilding the temple. Remember, that's the point of that first return? And the work stops for 15 years? And then there's this interesting way that Ezra records it. You remember, he talks about two other times where the king issued a decree halting work. He spends a verse talking about something that Ahasuerus did in verse 6, who was the king at the time of Esther, and then he mentions Artaxerxes stopping the work. Now he's talking about it, he's narrating events that happened 90 years before the present time but he refers to Artaxerxes who did something just about 12 years before what we're reading in this passage. It's really kind of interesting how the Lord put that. You would have expected that to have come actually between Ezra 10 and Nehemiah 1 historically, chronologically but God doesn't always organize this stuff, the material chronologically because he's telling us a prophetic message and he puts it and he trusts that we would know and, of course, the original audience did know. They didn't have any trouble mixing up who Ahasuerus was and Artaxerxes or Xerxes like you and I do.

Don't you have trouble with that? I know when I look at it again and I've worked over this again and again way back there in that chapter, Ezra 4, and I'm still like, "Wait a second, when exactly was this?" And part of it is the names, you know, we read these names and they're just difficult, elusive. It's not like if you were, but think about if you said Franklin Roosevelt and he gave a speech, and then you talk about, you know, George H. W. Bush, some speech he gave, and then you talk about Barack Obama and some speech he gave, and you go back and then you talk about Roosevelt again, you guys are able to figure out, "Well, I know, we moved back 80 years," right? Or we moved forward.

That's the way it is here and so the people that are reading the book of Ezra-Nehemiah know full well and they have in their minds and they're not that far removed. For them it's more like the distance from these events are even closer than 9/11 is to us. They remember this Artaxerxes thing that was talked about in Ezra 4, and essentially what happened in Ezra 4, after Artaxerxes gave permission to Ezra to go back with the second return to restore the law, he gets reports from Jerusalem that they're rebuilding the city, rebuilding the wall, and Artaxerxes sends word, even though he sent Ezra and blessed him to go, he sends word and says, "Stop the work because the report is, listen, you guys, check out the history, this is what these evil guys do." It's not Sanballat and Tobiah, their predecessors, they send word and say, "Look, you need to do a careful search of the archives." Because, remember, Judah is a little small, out-of-the-way place compared... Persia is not that worried about what's going on in Judah. "So search the archives and you will find that Jerusalem has been a real bear for the kings to deal with. They've revolted continually against the Babylonian kings. So search the archives, you'll find that out." Well, Artaxerxes does that. He just sent Ezra, blessed him and said, "Go, restore the law, take all the money with you, rebuild the temple. Do what you need to do for Jerusalem."

He gets this report and it's like he turns on a dime and says, "Stop the presses. Stop the work."

Now fast forward about 12 years and Nehemiah has gotten that same Artaxerxes to let him go back to rebuild the walls and he started the work and he's nearing completion, and here with only the gates are down. Now what good's a city wall without gates? There are six different gates that the enemy can just flood in. So here they are trying to stop the work and so they send the word, "Listen, hey, I'm trying to help you out, Nehemiah. Word's going to get to the King that you're going to be King yourself." And it had to be something that really resonated with Nehemiah and the Jews. It could have easily been, as it says here, they could easily have been discouraged with the work and stopped. But they don't. Nehemiah responds to that open letter with force. "Such things as you are saying have not been done, but you are inventing them in your own mind." He knows where that report came from. "I know who came up with that report that you've been hearing. It's you, yourself, Sanballat."

And so Nehemiah responds but that's not enough. There's a third attempt. Verses 10 to 13, Sanballat and Tobiah hire a false prophet within Judah itself and it's a man of standing. His name is Shemaiah the son of Delaiah. We know he's a man of standing because he could send word to Nehemiah and say, "Listen, I can't leave my house." He may have been ill or something. "I can't leave my house. I need you to come here for a meeting." And Nehemiah because of this man's standing in the community goes and meets with him and most believe he is a prophet himself, or was regarded as a prophet, and he certainly does issue a word of prophecy to Nehemiah. He tells him, "Listen, we need to meet together in the house of God. You need to get inside of the temple immediately because they are coming to kill you and they are coming to kill you at night."

Nehemiah, to go into the temple would be to lean upon God to deliver you from enemies. There was this, kind of this idea that if you took hold of the horns of the altar, you were safe from enemies, more of a superstition than anything rooted in Scripture. But Nehemiah quickly discerns, "The reality is if I go into the temple because there's a plot to kill me, then I'm going to be acting out of fear and I will be sinning and the work will be discredited, if I stop the work because of fear." And we're going to see fear is a really big thing in this passage. If you heard, the New American Standard translates the same word the same time every time it's used, "frighten us." Four times the word "frighten" occurs in the passage. Some of the other translations will go back and forth between "make afraid, be afraid, frighten." But it's the same Hebrew word. Beginning in verse 9, "they were trying to frighten us." Verse 13, "he was hired for this reason, that I might become frightened and act accordingly and sin, so that they might have an evil report in order that they could reproach me."

So these false prophets and he tells us there's not just one false prophet, there's a whole group of them. Verse 14 tells us that when Nehemiah again prays, "Remember, O my God, Tobiah and Sanballat according to these works of theirs, and also remember Noadiah the prophetess," that's a women with a Hebrew name, she's a Jew, they're in

Judah, and she claims to be a prophetess and she has been prophesying against the work, along with "the rest of the prophets," there's a whole group of prophets, people who claim to speak the word of God and they are trying to, as he says, "they were trying to frighten me." I mean, here the attacks are coming from outside and inside and those who claimed to know the Lord and to speak in God's name are speaking in God's name against the work that Nehemiah is doing.

So you think isn't this a time of celebration, "We've got the walls almost done. I mean, the walls are finished, the gates just need to be built. We're almost there, guys. It's time to start planning the celebration, the dedication of the walls." And yet all of this attack is just intensifying. That's the way it is in a fallen world. That's the way it is in our lives.

Then you have the wall being finished in verse 15, 52 days, and you have this hopeful note in verse 16, "When all our enemies heard of it, and all the nations surrounding us," remember, they're surrounded by enemies, the enemies hear of it, the nations surrounding them, "they lost their confidence." This is good. They lost their confidence. "The enemies now are going to go away and leave us alone." And something radical has happened. This is the thing, you've got to understand, God is doing something profound and miraculous. Don't miss that, but it doesn't mean the opposition stops. So in our lives when God is doing something profound and miraculous, it will not mean that the opposition and the difficulty will stop. Don't you wish it did? Don't you get tired, just weary?

"They lost their confidence; for they recognized that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God." They look at it and they know, "Listen, this ragtag group of people has built the wall of Jerusalem in a little over seven weeks, has to have been divine intervention." But that's not where the chapter ends. That's where I'd like it to end. "Also in those days many letters went from the nobles of Judah to Tobiah, and Tobiah's letters came to them." There's actually letters going from the nobles, the leaders of Judah are sending letters to Nehemiah and the Jews, you would think their archenemy, what are they doing corresponding with them? Well, we find out they "were bound," verse 18, "by oath to him because he was the son-in-law of Shecaniah," he married into family. In fact, he has a Jewish name, Tobiah. We talked about this at one point, Yahweh is good, that's what his name means, and yet he doesn't believe that. He's married into the family and he has all kinds of contacts and all kinds of influence, and listen to this, verse 19, "Moreover, they were speaking about his good deeds in my presence." Nehemiah's got to hear people telling him what a great guy Tobiah is. Have you seen that kind of thing? Have you experienced that where you know someone who seems to be an enemy of the Lord in your life, who seems to be an enemy of all that is good, and yet there are people who are reporting only the good deeds? Well, good deeds are good deeds but what about all of the evil deeds of Tobiah?

"Then Tobiah sent letters to frighten me." So that's where the chapter ends and so we see this sense of the flow of the chapter definitely, the flow of the narrative says these key points of apparent victory are followed by increasing difficulty and opposition.

So the expectation meets reality. That's the flow of the narrative. The second point is the implications of the narrative and basically there's two subpoints here. There's two implications, I think, that we want to look at from this account that can help us to manage our expectations and to continue in perseverance with the work God has called us to.

So the implications of the narrative. The first is the work we are called to do is a great work. The work you and I have been given is a great work. It is of the highest order of importance. Nehemiah's statement in verse 3, "I am doing a great work and I cannot come down." How that must have sounded to those evil governors and enemies of the Lord. Here the man who had been and will again be cupbearer to the king, that is, in a court of the Emperor of Persia himself in Susa. Nehemiah, one of the most influential people in the whole Persian empire because of that position, left that position of authority and responsibility, came all the way to the backwaters of the Persian empire to a place that they generally, they basically called, the way the Persians referred to this part of the world was the area beyond the river. Everything beyond the Euphrates was just over there. "It's over there somewhere. Yeah, it's some out-of-the-way place." Nehemiah leaves the seat of power to go over there somewhere to somewhere that seems like nowhere, to do something that seems like nothing. What good are the walls of a city that is subjugated by Persia?

I think that's one of the reasons that these guys come up with that idea. "Why are you building walls? You must be going to revolt. You don't need walls." Well, they're building walls because the walls provide separation from the surrounding world and they make the worship of Yahweh holy. But Nehemiah has left what the world would say was a great work to do what the world would say is a nothing work, and in reality, what Nehemiah says, "I've left something that was of much less work to do the truly great work because I'm doing the work of God. The One who has created all things out of nothing, I am building a city for His name. Nothing is of greater value than that."

So the work we are called to do is a great work and, well, we're not called to rebuild Jerusalem, you're not called to give your money so that people can go over there and build the walls of Jerusalem today physically. The application to us is that in the unfolding of God's plan of redemption, we see that the walls of Jerusalem and Jerusalem itself are a type of the church. In Revelation 21, we see that the new Jerusalem comes down out of heaven prepared as a bride for her husband. The new Jerusalem, the fulfillment of what Jerusalem is comes down out of heaven as a bride for her husband. Well, the bride of Christ is the church, Ephesians 5.

We learned in probably in middle school that if $A = B$ and $B = C$, $A = C$. So if the church is the bride and the bride is Jerusalem, the church is Jerusalem. And the walls, we've talked about the walls, building the walls of Jerusalem, what we're called to do is to build the separation of holiness from the world, that this is speaking about sanctification, that when we are pursuing holiness and to be different from the world by God's grace, not to be separate physically from the world. No, we're not calling for a monastic way of life, not at all. That's not biblical. We're not to be separate from the world and to run from the world. No, we're to be in the world but not of the world. We're to be separate from the

world in our hearts, in our devotion, that we are to be completely consecrated to God, to Christ, to belong to him and to pursue Christlikeness, to pursue holiness.

So the walls are really a sense of picture of our sanctification, that is, our growth in holiness, our growth in obedience. Justification is by faith. Justification is where we are delivered from the penalty of sin. When you place your faith in Jesus Christ, you surrender to him as your personal Lord, Savior, your Master, you surrender to Jesus, then you are justified forever in his sight, declared righteous forever, your sins are taken out of the way, put upon Christ, his righteousness is given to you and you go from being a filthy sinner to being a blood-bought and robed in righteousness child of the living God. That's justification, and then now being born again and having a new heart, now you and I are called, those of us who belong to Christ are called to pursue holiness. That is sanctification. That is to make our lives more and more like Jesus, to fight against indwelling sin, to put off evil practices and words and attitudes, and to replace them by the power of God and the cross of Jesus Christ with Christ-like attitudes and words and actions. And this is our life's work and Nehemiah's telling you that is the great work. There's nothing of greater worth than that work in your life because that is the work that you can do for the name and glory of God.

Now it doesn't mean that other things aren't significant. They are. But the supreme work, the great work is the work of pursuing holiness. You do this as you put sin to death in your own life by the power of God. Again, you know, I said justification is by faith alone, you believe in the finished work of Christ and you don't put any trust in yourself, you believe that he's willing to save and he's able to save and he's done everything necessary to save, and you trust in him. But sanctification is also by faith alone but you actually grow in holiness by believing that everything that Jesus is and everything that he's done is sufficient for you to walk in victory over sin, and it's a day-to-day battle but you're essentially believing that his righteousness is yours, that his death is your death. And so sanctification, I said justification is you're delivered from the penalty of sin, sanctification is salvation, deliverance from the power of sin because sin still is a power that dwells in us.

And this work is such a delight to God, so when you and I are fighting our sin, we are doing the great work. We are building the walls of Jerusalem, and isn't it your experience that when you have a breakthrough, an apparent victory, when you have something that really is incredible, isn't it true that you can't rest and celebrate? Don't you wish you could? But that's not God's plan, not for this life. That's what heaven is. Heaven is our rest. There remains a rest for the people of God. That's heaven. And there's a sense of rest here and it's the rest of not doing it in our own power but resting in Christ, but the rest here is a paradoxical rest. We rest, he works, he does the power and yet we still fight, we still encounter difficulty, we still are at war, and that's the paradox.

And Nehemiah, this book is telling us this. Remember I mentioned this is the last book in the Old Testament, in the flow of the Old Testament story of God's work that began back in the garden of Eden, and it's written about by Moses all the way down, and Nehemiah is the last prophet who writes historical narrative of the Old Testament, and then we're

going to have 400+ years of silence. He writes probably between 420 and 430 BC. We're about to have 400 years of silence from God. No prophets.

So the message of Nehemiah, in a sense, is part of the capstone of the Old Testament and essentially what it's saying is, "Listen, continue to be faithful. Continue to remember to put worship at the center. Rebuild the temple." Ezra-Nehemiah together are one book, remember? "Rebuild the temple. Make worship central. Restore the law to its place and fight and pursue holiness and keep doing it until Christ comes. And it's not going to get easy." That's the message, and isn't that relevant to us today? Keep seeking to put worship central. It's all about worshipping God and worshipping Christ. It's all that life is about. That's why we were made. It's what we're wired for. It's what every human being is made to do. The word of God must be our life's blood, as it were. It's the life blood of worship. If you don't have the word, you can't worship. But there must be this commitment to pursue holiness, and this part of it, though all of it is by grace and grace alone, this part of it seems to be the part that seems most difficult. The work that we're called to do is great, it's noble, it's something that's precious to God.

I want to mention to you a couple of metaphors or, well, one metaphor particularly, Matthew 18:12-20 and I'll just tell you and summarize what it says there and I encourage you to look at it. Matthew 18:12, Jesus said, "What man who has 100 sheep and he loses one, has 99 in the fold but he loses one, what man among you would not leave the 99 in the fold and go after the one and would rejoice greatly when he finds that one?" He's saying, "This is what the good shepherd does. The good shepherd cares about that one wayward sheep." In fact, turn over to that passage if you haven't turned. Let's look at it. We're talking about the work we are called to do is great, it's great in the eyes of God. So verse 14, "So it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish." God doesn't want one of his children to perish. He wants every one of those who profess faith in Christ to finish at his throne by his grace. What does he say next? "If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses, every word can be confirmed. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven." Verse 20, "For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst."

What he's saying in that passage is Jesus cares about every single lost sheep and he is a shepherd who goes after his lost sheep, and the way he goes after his lost sheep, his sheep who are wandering from the fold, is through you and me loving each other enough to go speak hard words to one another. And he says by verse 20, you know, you sometimes hear people quote this verse, misquote it when they say, I mean, they don't misquote it, they misapply it, "For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst," we use that for a small prayer meeting. It's an encouragement. "Hey, there's only four or five of us here but we've got two or three so Jesus is in our midst." Right? Well, it's true but that's not what the passage is saying. That passage is saying that

where the two or three have gathered to reclaim that wayward sheep, Christ is there in their midst. It's Jesus going after his lost sheep.

He does it through the means of church discipline. This is why church discipline is an essential mark of the true church. This is why so; it is appalling that so many churches don't practice it. They just ignore the Shepherd's command, "Go after My lost sheep. If you love Me, you will go after those I love." But all of us can be guilty of halting, can't we? Even if we, our theology may say we believe in church discipline, our stated theology, but our practical theology may say something different. We have to love each other enough to speak to one another. When we think someone has sinned or they seem to be growing distant, they seem to be getting interested in the things of the world more than the things of God, we need to go after them and say, "Listen, hey." And you go humbly, you don't go pronouncing judgment, you don't go... No, you go, you're trying to serve a sheep and bring them back. You're going as... Think about a sheep that's separated from the flock, what hope does the sheep have separated from the flock out there in the world? Think about it. You don't see sheep just walking around like you see deer. I mean, you don't see deer walking around that much, but you know, you'll see them sometimes, right? But deer can run. Sheep aren't that fast. Sheep have no sense and sheep, I understand that there's some debate about how much that's true but they are defenseless animals. They need a shepherd. They need to be with the flock. There is safety in the flock as well.

So a wayward sheep is soon to be a dead sheep, so if we love our brothers and sisters, we go. And what this book, Nehemiah is telling us that when we go, when we're pursuing holiness in the life of other believers, we're helping them put off sin, we're investing our time in having that hard conversation, we're making ourselves uncomfortable and making ourselves vulnerable and realizing we can be rejected, realizing we may be misunderstood and we go and we do that, God looks down and says, "That is a great work you are doing, nothing more important in the world than that." The world says it's nothing. The world says, "What are you doing messing with somebody else's business?" The world says, "That's despicable. That's beneath you. That should be outlawed." God says, "That is precious." Ted read from Galatians 6 earlier, first verse, "if anyone of you is caught in a trespass, let those who are spiritual among you restore such a one." Paul, they're saying the same thing. Listen, if someone's caught in sin, it pleases God for you to, those of you who are spiritual, to go and help him out. Be spiritual there means that your mind is set on the things of God, you're walking in the Spirit.

We're in Matthew 18, just turn over to Matthew 25, talking about what a great work this is, how Jesus feels about this when we go and we speak to one another, we admonish one another, we teach one another. Matthew 25:34, we read this last Sunday in our Scripture reading time. "Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.'" Now think about that, Jesus says that to this group of people in the picture of sheep. "Then the righteous

will answer Him, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' The King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.'" "If you love one of My sheep, you are loving Me."

You know that when you love one of God's sheep enough to speak the truth to them, to make yourself vulnerable, to confront them, and like I said, there's some skill and we learn, but listen, just do it. We'll get better over time and we're always going to mess up and you've got to confess, "Hey, I was too harsh in the way I said that. Please forgive me but I love you, I care about you. I came because I care about you." Someone who has a heart for God will appreciate that love. You may have to give it some time because we're all sheep, we get wayward, but when you do that, you are loving Jesus, you are doing something like what the woman did when she poured that alabaster vial on Jesus' head. You are expressing your worship and your affection to Christ if you're doing it with the right motivation.

You see now, if you go to someone you think is in sin and you go with a desire to love Jesus by loving them, do you see how that affects the way that you go? And when you go and your heart's desire is, "Lord, I don't know for sure if there's something here but I'm smelling smoke and where there's smoke there's usually fire." The older I get, the more often I'm convinced that there's always fire, just a matter of figuring out where it is. So you've got to deal with it. Smell smoke, you need to deal with it. But when you go and you do that out of a desire to love Jesus, you are blessing your Savior, you are loving him and you are loving your brother and sister with a love that we will appreciate throughout all eternity.

So the work we are called to is a great work. The implications of the narrative of the second subpoint here, the work we are called to is a grueling work. It is a grueling work. Apparent success in verse 1 of Nehemiah 6 followed by a three-pronged offensive from Sanballat, the message four times, the open letter, the false prophet plus the other false prophets, boom, boom, boom. The second apparent success, the note of hope afterwards. Remember now the walls are built, the gates are put in place, the people around us have even been checked to realize that God has done it, yet there's ongoing and insidious opposition. The opposition kind of moves underground and in that sense it's even more deadly and dangerous. And the chapter ends with that note of uncertainty.

So the work we are called to is a great work but the work we are called to is not easy. What were you expecting? What was I expecting? Don't we expect sometimes it's supposed to be easy? I think in fairness to us, in fairness to us, we have to be careful with this. You don't want to be too fair with yourself but there is a sense in which we were created for a perfect world. Eden, we were made for Eden. Eden was perfect. When Adam tilled the ground before sin, it worked so that the work that was expended, there was a commensurate return for the work.

First of all, it's interesting they were working before the fall. Work is good. There are people who think work is evil, that's evil itself. Work is good. God works and we work, and the work is great just as we saw, but the work is grueling especially in a fallen world because now, though we were made for Eden, we think it should be easy, "in this world you shall have tribulation but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." We're going to battle against it until Jesus returns. This is what makes us long for heaven, though, and for the new heavens and the new earth where it will be restored so that work will have a commensurate return. But until then we have to battle, we have to understand that it's not easy.

So when we get involved in people's lives, it's not going to be pretty. They're not going to thank us when we come every time. That will usually be the exception and when they do thank you, it'll usually be afterwards when they've had time to think about it. It's messy to help one another get out of sin. It's difficult to rebuild your marriage. It's hard to parent a wayward child. It's grueling to help a sister that is struggling with fear or a brother struggling with lust. And when you help someone, when you serve them, when you come alongside them, expect it's going to be hard. Don't be discouraged by the three steps forward, two steps back, one step forward, half a step back. The work of God in this fallen world is hard.

One thing that I think's really cool, though, about this chapter, I want to just share this with you. It's interesting the way that our expectations, what do we expect God's work to look like? One of the things that's really cool about this chapter and you see this as you read through the Old Testament, as you get farther and farther along, you see less and less what we would call openly supernatural miracles. You know, a supernatural miracle is like God, I mean openly supernatural miracle, God opens up the Red Sea, they go through and he kills all the Egyptians in the water. That's not something that happened just naturally and there are a lot of those in the Old Testament. But what you see as you go through the Old Testament is that the Lord moves from those sort of supernatural sign type miracles to more commonplace miracles like this, a group of ragtag people who aren't equipped to build a wall, build a wall in 52 days with the help of God. Do you see how different that is, the character of that? And what that's telling you is that is the way and that's the last word of God in the Old Testament. "This is the way I'm going to be working now, guys. I'm not going to be doing just light show kind of stuff. I just do that occasionally to get your attention. This is the way I work. I work through quiet means where people have to have faith." We walk by faith, not by sight.

So when you're working, it's going to feel like sometimes you're laying bricks or you're laying rocks on mortar and you don't feel equipped to do it and yet if you're trusting in the Lord, he is working in you and through you for his glory and miracles are happening that you can't see yet and I can't see yet, and those will redound to the praise and glory of God for all eternity. I think that's what Jesus is talking about when he says you can move mountains. There's a movement from the secular and visible to the inward and spiritual and the inward and spiritual is what is eternal. Raising Lazarus from the dead, that was impressive and Jesus did it to show his power, but it's more impressive and more long-lasting to save a sinner by bringing him from spiritual death to spiritual life. That lasts

forever. Lazarus died again physically. And you and I are called to do those kinds of spiritual miracles that are hidden and that happen in the most mundane and ordinary ways.

So expect it's going to be hard and expect that it's not going to look glamorous and expect that God is working through you as you preach his word and as you love your brothers and sisters, and expect that holiness is happening. It's not what we would like, but do you know what? It's better than what we would like. It really is. God's way is always better, isn't it?

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Father, we praise You for Your faithfulness, we praise You for the glory of the salvation that You've made known to us in Jesus Christ. We pray for those that are here today who need to repent and believe the gospel, that You would open their eyes, help them truly cast themselves upon Jesus, surrendering to Him for their salvation. Thank You that You will save anyone who comes to You, You will by no means cast out the one who reaches out to You.

Father, we pray for all who belong to You, that we would have endurance, that we would have biblical thought processes, that we would understand that life is hard until we get home, and that we would set our minds and prepare our minds for action and for war and for difficulty, and yet in it, Lord, that You would make us more than conquerors, that You would delight to show Yourself strong in our lives for Your glory in the midst of the mundane, that people around us would see evidences just like they did through otherwise apparently ordinary circumstances that people around them said they did this with the help of God. Lord, do this for Your glory. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.