**“Now Strengthen My Hands”**

Nehemiah 6:1-19

Key Verse 6:15-16

“So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days. When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God.”

When Nehemiah left his position of power and authority in the service of the King of Persia, he was fulfilling the Lord’s will in his life. The Lord had given him a mission to do. And what God had put on his heart to do was far more important than anything else he could have done in his life. So Nehemiah left everything behind, his life, his plans, his future security and everything else and he set out for Jerusalem. He was to rebuild the broken down walls of that great city Jerusalem. Seventy years ago, the Assyrians had invaded them and demolished the walls of that great city Jerusalem. It didn’t have to be that way. But it happened when they stopped living in the fear of God, abandoning the faith and mission God had laid upon them as a nation belonging to God, and choosing instead to no longer live for God. They had been warned by God. So when the Assyrians invaded them, they put their faith in those walls. They felt secure behind those invincible walls. But their faith and security were misplaced. When the Assyrians were done destroying the walls of Jerusalem, there was nothing left of these impregnable walls but miles and miles of rubble and of stone laying about in ruins. Our Lord Jesus once said to his disciples who marveled at the magnificent temple walls: “’Do you see all these great buildings?’ … ‘Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.’” (Mark 13:2) Surely our faith and our security cannot be in man made structures or institutions, for when the hand of God’s judgment strike, and it will surely come, nothing in heaven nor on earth can remain standing. Jesus also said: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.” (Mtt.24:35) In the end, the only thing that remains is the word of God.

Their security was not in the word of God but in the walls of Jerusalem. But God demolished these walls like a strong wind which can easily uproot even the greatest of trees. Now it has been seventy years since the walls were demolished and the people sent into exile. It was time to bring them back that they might once again live and die as they should, as God’s people chosen to take root and to uphold the word of God above all else— chosen to bring the knowledge of salvation to the whole world. As Isaiah had once said of Jesus: “He will be the sure foundation for your times, a rich store of salvation and wisdom and knowledge; the fear of the Lord is the key to this treasure.” (Isaiah 33:6) Once the people of Jerusalem no longer feared God. They lost not only the key to the knowledge of salvation, but they also lost their calling to bring the knowledge of salvation to the world. Now, God raised a man Nehemiah to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Why? So that they might find security in the walls of Jerusalem? No! Not to feel secure behind the walls— as some people feel secure with a cross hanging from their neck, or by carrying a Bible verse written on an index card. God would have Nehemiah rebuild the walls of Jerusalem in order to raise the Banner of God and his word, and in order to proclaim to the whole world that God is Almighty God, that he is a Living God, and that he is still working through those who fear him. To rebuild the walls of Jerusalem was like rebuilding the shattered hearts and faith of a people who once had lost their way, but now are returning to God— to faith in God— to the living word of God— and to the fear of God. For this reason, all the nations around them were trembling at the sight of the walls rising.

It was a prophesy, a word of God prophesied long ago proclaiming the return of the exiles, the restoration work that would take place at the very time God ordains that it happens. But it was also a holy proclamation that God’s salvation plan would proceed just as God had intended from the beginning of time. So the rebuilding of the walls was not just an architectural endeavor. It was the fulfillment of the Living word of God— a testimony to God. No wonder the devil trembled at the project and did everything in his power to hinder and stop the work. No wonder Nehemiah refused to let anything interfere with this holy work. No wonder he persevered because he “saw him who is invisible” and “considered him faithful who had made the promise.” (Heb.11:11,27) Nehemiah lived and walked in the fear of God. When he feared God, he did not live as a greedy and unconscionable governor like his predecessors. Rather he lived in the sight of God. He lived like a shepherd. He shared in the people’s troubles and worked hard to bring justice to those who were oppressed and downtrodden by those who took advantage of them. In chapter 5, he rebuked the unjust rulers to walk in the fear of God. When his words convicted them, he urged them to repent and to do what is right in the sight of God. He wanted them to live as shepherds— to fear God and to fulfill their purpose as the holy people of God who can be a blessing to the whole world.

Nehemiah’s mission to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem was not easy. But harder yet was to plant faith in the people’s hearts to begin the work. Then harder still was to challenge the people to live in the fear of God. Unless they walk in the fear of God, they would not be able to fulfill their purpose to bring the knowledge of God to the world. But every where Nehemiah turned in this great battle of wall rebuilding, he met up with opposition and hardship. In chapter 4, he tells us that his enemies paraded their armies outside the city in a show of might. They mocked and ridiculed the work and the workers, that the project was hopeless and their efforts useless. At the time Nehemiah responded to the threat by urging the people to hope in God and to put their faith in him. He helped them to be soldiers ready to defend the walls and God’s people within them. The threats were vicious, but slowly, the walls of Jerusalem kept rising until they were almost completed. At this point the enemies of God did not give up. Instead they changed their strategy in a final effort to cow Nehemiah into abandoning the mission God had given him. This is the story he tells us in this passage. Remarkably, the mission was completed. We must learn from Nehemiah how to fight our own discouragements, and finish the work God has given us to do.

Read verses 1-4. “When word came to Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall and not a gap was left in it— though up to that time I had not set the doors in the gates, Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message: ‘Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono.’ But they were scheming to harm me; so I sent messengers to them with this reply: ‘I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?’ Four times they sent me the same message, and each time I gave them the same answer.” These nations had for long been enemies to God and to God’s people. From the moment Nehemiah set foot in Jerusalem and proceeded to rebuild the walls of this city, the enemies set to work against him and the project. They had tried to intimidate him before, and it did not work. The wall was growing every day before their eyes. In desperation, they now tried another method. They invited him to come talk with them in the plain of Ono. The plain of Ono was about 20 miles northwest of Jerusalem. Their intent most probably was to lure him from the city and its defenders, either to take him captive or to attempt at his life.

Nehemiah was a long time high ranking official in the king’s employ. He was very familiar with protocol and with the endless political schemes and maneuvers of opposing parties. As also high ranking officials of the Persian empire, their invitation was not to be taken lightly. Nehemiah could not so easily refuse an invitation to meet with them. And even if he were to meet with them, it would be diplomatically uncouth to drag along an army behind him. It was a brilliant strategy to rid themselves of this annoying Nehemiah. How did Nehemiah respond? “I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?” Nehemiah used the very project they were desperate to put an end to, to respond to their summons. The work of rebuilding the wall had been God’s will and the mission God had entrusted Nehemiah to fulfill. At the same time, the work was sanctioned by the King himself. Nehemiah basically informed them that it would not be proper for him to neglect the king’s work in order to answer to their invitation. In truth, Nehemiah’s words “Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you” tells us something about Nehemiah’s basic attitude towards God’s work. He was committed to the work of God. He would not rest until it was completed. He was like the servant of whom Jesus said: “Well done, good and faithful servant.” (Mtt. 25:21)

Look at verse 4. Four times they sent the same invitation to Nehemiah. And four times, Nehemiah in turn reported that it would not be right for him to stop the work in order to answer to accept their invitation. It was clear from Nehemiah’s first time response that he would not fall for their effort to lure him away form the work. But as the devil is ever on the prowl, ever fighting against God and his people, never giving up his assaults on them, so did these enemies show the same determination to defeat Nehemiah and halt the project. And Nehemiah fought back with even greater determination. In the end, they changed their strategy yet again. And this time, they were fiercer and more determined than ever to lure him out from the city and the work of God. What did they do this time?

Read verses 5-7. “Then, the fifth time, Sanballat sent his aide to me with the same message, and in his hand was an unsealed letter in which was written: ‘It is reported among the nations— and Geshem says it is true— that you and the Jews are plotting to revolt, and therefore you are building the wall. Moreover, according to these reports you are about to become their king and have even appointed prophets to make this proclamation about you in Jerusalem: ‘There is a king in Judah!’ Now this report will get back to the king; so come, let us confer together.” When their attempt to call him away from the work failed the first four times, they did not give up. Rather their scheme became even more sinister. This time they attacked him directly. During those days, prophets such as Malachi was proclaiming the advent of the Messiah. ([Malachi 3:1-3](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Mal+3%3A1-3)). All God’s people far and near had heard the Messianic prophesies and were waiting expectantly for the Messiah to come. Enemies of God and of God’s people such as Sanballat knew exactly how to make trouble and to rile the people. This time, the enemy tried to turn Nehemiah's own people against him by accusing Nehemiah of trying to set himself up as the king. They also tried to turn the local officials against him by making a very viable threat. They would report to the king of Persia that Nehemiah, his trusted servant, was starting a revolt against the king and the empire. The letter they produced which contained the accusations was unsealed. His enemies wanted to make sure the letter's contents were made public.

Nehemiah was a man of God. He was a man of integrity. He was a compassionate man who loved God and the people of God with his whole heart. He had lived not as a governor with all the privileges and amenities that accompany such a position, but he lived as a shepherd who did not take use his position to serve himself but to serve God and his people. When the wealthy officials and nobles of the land treated the poor unjustly; when they used their wealth to their own selfish advantage, making those who were indebted to them slaves, Nehemiah did not turn a blind eye to this blatant evil. He defended the rights of the helpless and weak of the land. He openly rebuked the officials and nobles to repent and to do what is right in the sight of God. He was taking a big risk in making enemies out of those in positions of authority. But he valued God and God’s justice more than he valued his own life and position. Nehemiah was truly a good shepherd after God’s own heart. Who could dispute his integrity as a man, let alone as a man of God. The letter said that he was not a man of integrity. That his motives were self motivated. That his very purpose for rebuilding the walls was only a cover-up for evil intent. They intended to destroy him as a person by defaming his character. Rumors, gossip, false testimony, criticism — all these things are not from God. They are the devil’s tools to ruin God’s servants and hinder the work of God in and through them. Those who spread lies about a man or woman of God, and entertain false testimony about the work of God find themselves blaspheming the Holy Spirit. We must be careful to live in the sight of God. In the sight of God, we should spread nothing but his word and broadcast nothing but his grace to sinners like us.

Nehemiah read the letter, he heard their accusations. They were serious accusations that at the least would spur an investigation. They were accusations that at least would make him defensive, and eager to clear his name and motive. They were terrible accusations that should have stripped him of his position pending the king’s decision. It was a brilliant assault on Nehemiah, enough to make him despair of accepting this heavy burden of wall building which God had entrusted to him. But Nehemiah did no such thing. We are sure he was troubled at heart. But he also understood that the attack was not so much against him as it was against God and God’s work. They wanted to see Nehemiah’s character ruined and the work of God stopped. So what he do?

Read verses 8-9. “I sent him this reply: ‘Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head.’ They were all trying to frighten us, thinking, ‘Their hands will get too weak for the work, and it will not be completed.’ [But I prayed,] ‘Now strengthen my hands.’” Fear comes to a man’s heart only when that man is unsure of God’s sovereignty in his life and in the world. Fear comes to a man’s heart to paralyze him only when that man does not walk in the fear of God, but walks in his own way, doing his own thing. Until life and its demands overtake him and crush him under the heavy yoke of fear. Nehemiah should have been terrified at such accusations. But he was not. He lived and walked in the fear of God. He knew that God is sovereign over all things in heaven and on earth. He also knew that the work of God was to be completed, and that nothing must interfere with what God had willed be done. He was not afraid. As long as his eyes were on God, and on God’s will, Nehemiah was unmoved any , attempt against him or against the work of God. Look how a man or woman who live in God’s sovereignty rather than in the fear of this and that prays. “Now strengthen my hands.” He did not pray for his enemies to be destroyed not for his name to be cleared, nor did he pray for strength to endure his persecution. He prayed that God would strengthen his hands. His hands reflected the work of God he was doing. He asked God for strength to finish the work, God’s mission in his life. His prayer reveals what’s on his heart. He did not allow fear to rule him. He only wanted to finish what God had began through him.

Read verses 10-14. “One day I went to the house of Shemaiah son of Delaiah, the son of Mehetabel, who was shut in at his home. He said, "Let us meet in the house of God, inside the temple, and let us close the temple doors, because men are coming to kill you--by night they are coming to kill you." But I said, "Should a man like me run away? Or should one like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go!" I realized that God had not sent him, but that he had prophesied against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. He had been hired to intimidate me so that I would commit a sin by doing this, and then they would give me a bad name to discredit me. Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God, because of what they have done; remember also the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who have been trying to intimidate me.” When the attempt at defaming him Nehemiah failed, these enemies resorted to something else. There were many prophets in that day. Some were false and others were true prophets. This man Shemaiah, was known to be a prophet. But Nehemiah exposed him as a false prophet. Nehemiah exposed him as a man of self interest rather than one whose interests holy and righteous. Nehemiah exposed him by revealing that the prophet’s advice and warning to Nehemiah were not from God. Nehemiah said: “should one like me go into the temple to save his life?” He also said: “He had been hired to intimidate me so that I would commit a sin by doing this.”

Should a man like me save himself, when a man’s life is God’s hands? Should a man like me hide when God Almighty is the king of heaven? Nehemiah knew God his savior. To save himself would be committing sin against God. When they taunted Jesus to save himself, Jesus never did so. Jesus trusted that he had to suffer the pains of the cross for the salvation of all men. Jesus believed that God sent him to give his life as a ransom for many. Jesus believed that the will of God for him was to endure the torment of the cross, and to shed his blood for the forgiveness of all sinners. How great was our Lord Jesus who did not save himself nor his life for our sake. How great is Jesus who also taught us not to save our lives but to give our lives to God and to his great work. When Jesus was willing to suffer and to surrender his life into God’s hands, Jesus defeated death and rose form the dead, and so opened the gates of the kingdom to us. The precious Jesus could have saved himself. But he didn’t. It was for the benefit of all mankind. Nehemiah was called for a difficult task that proved to be risky and deadly at times. The devil tried to make him save his own life. But Nehemiah understood that if he did so, the work of God would be hindered. God intended to demonstrate to the whole world that God is Almighty and sovereign over all things. That the wall building is very much part of God’s great plan to redeem the world. Nehemiah knew that to save oneself is a sin against God who called him to suffer the hardship with faith and trust in God. All God’s servants in history had opportunity to save themselves. But they did not because they were determined not to sin against God by hindering the work of God. Often men in difficult situations, even in Christian life, save themselves. It is the natural thing to do. It is the practical thing to do. But the word of God teaches us that salvation, whether physical or spiritual, belongs to God. That only God can save us. Even if men succeed in saving their own lives, their hearts and souls die in sin. “For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.” (Mark 8:35)

Look at verses 17-19. The attempts to intimidate Nehemiah never stopped as long as the wall was in the process of being rebuilt. His enemies used even false prophets to intimidate him and to stop him from finishing the work God had given him to do. But Nehemiah endured and persevered. He stood by faith from first to last. And this is why he did so. Read verses 15-16. “So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days. When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God.” From the beginning the attack to stop the work on the wall not so much on Nehemiah and the people of God as much as it was on God himself. The wall would rise. It would be a testimony to the whole world that God is a living God, and that he is the God who has been working throughout history to bring about his great and wondrous salvation work. How great it is that we live in a time when the greatest wall in history has already been built some 2000 years ago. Jesus death and resurrection is the wall of testimony that God has sent his son into the world to redeem the world from sin, and to bring the new age of Christ and of the Holy Spirit upon his people. Let us put our faith in Jesus as we do the work of God, with full confidence that he who began a good work in us will bring it to completion. Amen.