

God's Enemies (Part 2)

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[0 : 00] Good morning. My name is Matthew Capone, and I'm the pastor here at Cheyenne Mountain Presbyterian Church, and it's my joy to bring God's Word to you today.

A special welcome if you are new or visiting with us. We are glad that you're here. And we're glad that you're here with us not because we are interested in filling seats, but because we are following Jesus together as one community, and we are convinced as we follow Jesus that there is no one so good that they don't need God's grace, and no one so bad that they can't have it.

And so God has something to say to every one of us this morning, and every one of us needs to hear what God has to say. If you've been with us, you know that we're in the book of Nehemiah. We've made some progress. We're now in chapter 6, and the book of Nehemiah is a book about a man named Nehemiah, and this man lived in the 5th century B.C., and he was living in the Persian Empire, and at the time he was living there, he began to understand and realize that God's city in Jerusalem had fallen into ruins.

And so he began the process of repenting of his sin and the sins of the people of Israel in the Old Testament, turning back from the ways they had abandoned God and instead turning back to God's wall to rebuild the city that he had given them.

[1 : 16] The purpose of Jerusalem was to be a light to the nations, that everyone would see what happens when God's people follow after God's ways. We saw last week that they had not just abandoned God's wall, but they had in fact abandoned God's ways, and so there was oppression of the poor that was happening.

And Nehemiah then is leading his people not just in this physical reconstruction, but also in a spiritual reconstruction. Previously in chapter 4, we saw that as God's people return to God's ways, there is an inevitable opposition that comes, that we cannot have impact without opposition, because God has real enemies that come up against his people when they try to follow him. We're going to see that again this morning. We're in Nehemiah chapter 6, and God's enemies are going to show up again. If you are familiar, if you live life here in North America, you know that something that we have heard more and more about in the last few years is the phenomenon of fake news.

Fake news is exactly what it sounds like, right? People put out news articles on the internet that are not true, and they don't do this just for their own amusement, but there's a purpose behind it. The purpose of fake news is to make people afraid, because there's few emotions that we experience that are more powerful than fear.

And if you can make people afraid, there's few things you won't be able to get them to do. In other words, if you can make people afraid, then they are like butter in your hands.

[2 : 43] Fear is one of the most powerful emotions that we come up against, and so that is why fake news has become so popular. If you can make someone afraid of the other political party, then you can convince them to show up and vote for yours.

If you can make someone afraid of people who are different than them, then you can convince them to help them stumble rather than to support them. But fake news is not something that's new. It's been around for a long time, and we're going to see some fake news in our passage this morning. We are in Nehemiah chapter 6, and I'm just going to name that sometimes it's hard for many of us, myself included, to pay careful attention when we are reading long passages of God's Word.

Some of that's just part of being human, right? I don't say that to shame anyone. It's just our attention spans, they move from place to place. So I'm going to give you a little bit of an assignment. As we read, I want you to see if you can spot all the places where the word afraid or

frightened appear in this passage.

And if you have a pen with you, feel free to circle or underline. That'll be my way to keep you all on track as we read. We're in Nehemiah chapter 6, and remember that this is God's Word.

[3 : 55] And God tells us that His Word is a hammer that breaks a rock into pieces. In other words, there is no opposition that can stand in the way of the impact that God has when He speaks.

And so please read with me now, starting at verse 1. Verse 3.

Verse 7.

Verse 10.

Verse 11.

[5 : 59] Verse 9. 1. Verse 12.

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 reason he was hired, that I should be afraid and act in this way in sin, so they could give me a bad name in order to taunt me.

Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, oh 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. Verse 15.

So the wall was finished on the 25th day of the month Elul in 52 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.

Moreover, in those days, the nobles of Judah sent many letters to Tobiah, and Tobiah's letters came to them, for many in Judah were bound by oath to him, because he was the son-in-law of Shekariah, the son of Ere.

[7 : 11] And his son, Jehohanan, had taken the daughter of Meshulam, the son of Barachiah, as his wife. Also they spoke of his good deeds in my presence and reported my words to him.

And Tobiah sent me letters to make me afraid. Please pray with me as we come to this portion of God's word. Dear Father in heaven, we thank you for your word that you've given to us.

We thank you that you have not left us alone to be afraid, but instead you've come and you've spoken to us. We ask that you would do that again, that you would open our eyes to see, you would unstop our ears to hear, and you would clear our minds that we can understand and believe everything that is written about you in your word.

We ask all these things in the name of your son. Amen. Over the past few weeks, we've seen the wall that Nehemiah is rebuilding come up little by little, and it would be almost as if you were living in a neighborhood and you know a new house is being built, and you get to see it stage by stage. First just the frame comes up, then slowly more and more until finally maybe the only thing that's left is for there to be put, for sod to be put in the yard so that there can be grass. And this is what we find out when we come to the beginning of chapter 6.

[8 : 30] Everything has been finished except for the gates. The work that has happened that we've seen over many chapters now has come to completion, and there's only one thing left to do.

And so as Nehemiah's enemies look, they realize that everything they've done to oppose him has failed. All that they can do is a last-ditch effort.

In the past, we saw in chapter 4 that they were going to attack the Israelites who were rebuilding the wall, and that's not an option anymore. And so now assassination of Nehemiah is all that's left.

And that's the plot we find here at the beginning. They send to Nehemiah in chapter 2 asking him to meet them in an isolated place. Of course, Nehemiah sees right through them and tells them multiple times that he is so busy rebuilding the wall that he can't join them.

And their insistence that he come to a place where it would be easy to kill him confirms his fears.

That this is a place where they're looking for foul play. Realizing this isn't going to work for Nehemiah, they finally push their fake news.

[9 : 33] They tell him, look, you're going to have to meet us because these rumors are being spread about you. Everyone knows what you're really trying to do. We know that this is not about returning to God and his ways. We actually know that you are trying to become powerful politically.

And you're trying to take away Judah from the Persian Empire. And so if you don't come and meet with us, you're going to face all the consequences of being an enemy politically of the Persian king. That doesn't work either, though. So they try another strategy. They hire a fake priest. Now, maybe this man is legitimately a priest at some level, but he does not represent God.

And so, on the one hand, they try to get Nehemiah to give in to fear and turn away from God's work. And their second strategy is to convince Nehemiah not to necessarily turn away from God's work, but to use fear for him to disobey God's law.

They ask him to hide in a place in the temple that was reserved only for the priests, hoping that as Nehemiah feels threatened for his life that he won't care about anything that God's commanded.

[10:39] Instead, he'll simply run into this trap that they've set for him. He'll go into the holy place where people who are not priests were supposed to stay away from. But Nehemiah, instead of giving in to the fear of the end of his life, instead sticks close to God and his commands.

And so he says in verse 11, should such a man as I run away, and what man such as I could go into the temple and live? In other words, Nehemiah knows that in the past, people who went into God's holy place without permission were struck dead.

And so if he ran away on the one hand from a plot to kill him, he might meet death at God's hands in the end. And so that strategy does not work either.

And then we find out that there's something else that's going on. There's someone who's powerful in the Jewish community who has many alliances. There's this man named Tobiah that we find out about in verse 17.

We've met Tobiah before. He seems to have some connection. He may be Jewish himself. If he's not, he's very powerful in the Jewish community. He's powerful because he has people who are bound by oath to him, we find out in verse 18.

[11:54] And then he's powerful because of his alliances through marriage. And he uses all of this, as we find out in the last verse, to continue to try to make Nehemiah afraid.

He's sending out letters to people who have power, convincing them that Nehemiah is someone they should not help. Over and over and over, the opposition that Nehemiah faces in this chapter is the opposition, the temptation to give in to fear.

We saw in chapter four that our enemy, the devil, has many strategies that he uses to come up against God's people. His favorite strategy in North America where we are is to convince people that there's nothing more important than their comfort and convenience so that he can lull us to sleep and we are not trying to have an impact because we don't care about God and his ways anymore.

But as we saw happen in chapter four, that didn't work with Nehemiah. And so he came with all out opposition. And now we find out another strategy of our enemy, that he is rightly named the father of lies.

that fear and lies are one of his greatest strategies to come up against God's people when they're following him. It's fear that speeds things up.

[13:14] If you want someone to do something quickly, if you want to prevent them from thinking carefully, then all you need to do is make them afraid. People who are afraid act much faster than anyone else.

I was at a retreat recently with some other pastors in our area and we were staying at a rental home in Breckenridge for a night right before one of our regional gatherings as a chance to meet and pray together.

And there came a point where we got a call from the rental company saying that we had too many cars in the driveway and that the HOA was going to start towing our cars. And there was a meeting to try to figure out what was going to happen, how we were going to rearrange our cars so that we would not be towed.

There are very strict laws in Breckenridge, I found out about, you're only allowed to have four cars in a driveway. You can't park on the street at all. I ended up getting a little note in my hand with a cell phone number and telling me to move my car immediately.

And I decided I was not going to take part in this discussion about how to move the cars. I just left the house. I left the house, I ran to my car, I warmed it up and I immediately got out of there and went to a different spot.

[14:26] And it wasn't until after I'd done that that I realized fear speeds things up. There was no imminent threat of us being towed. We had just received a call from the Homeowners Association.

There was not a tow truck on the way at that moment. But just the suggestion that someone might tow my car was enough for me to jump into action. Fear is a powerful emotion.

And it speeds things up. It's one of the greatest tools that our enemy uses to keep us from the good things that God has for us. It's fear of missing out that destroyed Adam and Eve.

Believing that there was something good that God wanted to keep from them. It's fear that God is not in control or not good that causes us to break His laws rather than to follow Him.

It's fear of failure that keeps us from ever trying something great. Ever trying to follow God because we are afraid that we'll find out our greatest fear, that we're not enough.

[15 : 31] We're afraid to pray to God to ask Him for things because we don't know what we're going to do if He tells us no. It's fear that causes us to control other people.

Fear of embarrassment that someone might see our kids misbehaving that causes us to be harsh with them. It's fear that moves us quickly away from God and His ways into our own comfort, our own security.

Now we could talk all day about this sort of general fear. I could tell you about all kinds of different facets of fear and what it does to us but the fear that we see here is a specific fear. It's not fear of heights or fear of certain places but this is the fear that comes up against us when we try to follow God and His ways.

It's the fear that comes when we are going on God's mission. It's the fear that our enemy uses to convince us that what we are trying to do when we follow God is a terrible idea.

It's the fear that makes us believe that if we follow God and obey His laws it will lead to death.

That's what's presented to Nehemiah here. If he doesn't run away, if he doesn't meet them in this isolated place, then political ruin is going to come.

[16 : 48] If he doesn't run into the temple, then his own personal death is going to come. Now we don't necessarily fear that someone's going to come kill us or assassinate us here in southwest Colorado Springs.

But we do have fear when God calls us to have hard conversations with other people that would lead to reconciliation. We're afraid to talk with other people about the way that we have sinned or the way that they have sinned against us so that we could move forward as one community.

That's the fear that comes up when we're trying to follow God and His ways. There's fear of personal conflict. Many people who we think of as peacemakers, now there are real peacemakers, right?

There are people who work through conflict in a way that's healthy and wise. But then there's other people that we think of as peacemakers that are really just scared. They're profoundly scared of what would happen if they actually talked about the things that they have done that have upset others and the things that others have done that have upset them.

There's a fear that comes when we try to talk about Jesus with our friends and our neighbors who don't know Him. That somehow we'll be rejected and isolated and marginalized. There's a fear in Christian churches right now in North America that we are going to be persecuted and marginalized.

[18 : 10] And that fear on the one hand causes some people to run away from God and His ways. We don't want to be associated with God and His law and what He says is good for the world because we're afraid of the shame that might come to us.

But our enemy is tricky and he can use our fear in the opposite way as well. Instead of being afraid of what happens if people see us embracing what God calls good there are others of us who take that and embrace it but then we take that as an opportunity to complain and play the victim giving our energy and our time to focusing on what we need to fear rather than what God has called us to. There are entire podcasts and magazines and websites and blogs that are devoted to letting God's people know everything they need to be afraid of. And yet you'll rarely find among the people who publish these things lists of ways that God's people can follow Him.

Follow Him into the difficult relationships and ministries that He's called them to. Nehemiah sets a great example for us here in verse 14. He recognizes that God has enemies that oppose Him and that that's not the focus of His energy.

He hands it over to God. He doesn't spend His time creating a podcast about 10 ways the Persian Empire is going to marginalize Israelites. Instead, He simply says, remember, oh my God, what these people have done.

[19 : 40] He gives God the chance to bring justice and then He leaves it to Him and returns to His mission. And so we can spend our time being afraid or we can spend our time following God as He calls us to minister to the community around us.

Nehemiah doesn't avoid the scary things in this world but he also doesn't let them consume him. He turns back right to the temple. He turns back to God's city that needs to be rebuilt.

There's also a certain fear that comes in our doubts. And don't hear what I'm not saying. There are legitimate doubts and intellectual questions that people have about Christianity.

But there are also people who refuse to embrace the gospel, refuse to follow after Jesus, not because they don't understand the gospel, not because they don't understand the claims of Christianity, but there are those of us who have doubts and objections because we understand it all too well.

And we know exactly what we would have to give up and lose if we were going to follow Jesus. And so often doubts and objections are ways that we hide our fear.

[20 : 55] Fear of what we would lose. Nehemiah here loses. We already saw it in chapter 5. He lost his political position as the Persian cupbearer. He lost a lot of money as he spent his own personal resources feeding the Israelites around him because they did not have what they needed.

And so fear is something that comes up against people inside the church and people outside the church as well. Whenever we follow after Jesus, whenever God calls us to his mission, fear will always be there with us.

One of the most common phrases in the Bible that God speaks to his people is do not be afraid.

And if you look at the context, you'll notice that God never says do not be afraid to his people when they are caught up in idolatry and sin and oppression.

He says do not fear when they're doing wisdom and courage. When they're trying to choose those things and follow him, that's when they're going to come up against the opposition.

That's when they're going to feel the temptation that Nehemiah feels here as well to give up the work. That's what we see in verse 9. This fear has a goal.

[22 : 13] They all wanted to frighten us thinking their hands will drop from the work and it will not be done. In other words, it's when we follow after God and take up his work that we're going to meet fear. That's when we're going to encounter all the lies of our enemy who comes up against us.

Now the problem and the struggle here is also that this fear is real. It has real foundations.

Nehemiah has real enemies who are seeking to really kill him.

They really want him dead. And so while this fear is in temptation, it's also a reality. And so God meets us there as well. We don't just see the word frightened and afraid repeated over and over.

But we also see Nehemiah's response and God's faithfulness. The first thing we find out in this chapter is that the wall has been built. Remember I mentioned at the beginning that all that's left to do is to put in the gates.

Despite the plots of chapter 4, despite the internal opposition of chapter 5, the dissension over money and oppression, God has finished this work.

[23 : 27] His people have not been perfect. They've been tempted at times to forget courage and wisdom and instead choose fear. But God has remained faithful to them so that the wall is complete.

God hasn't done just that in verse 1, but then in verse 9 we see Nehemiah's prayer. On the one hand, God doesn't call us to safety. He calls us to wisdom and courage.

But he doesn't do that without giving us strength. He doesn't remove the challenges and the obstacles we face, but he gives us what we need to walk through them. And that's what Nehemiah prays for in verse 9.

But now, O God, strengthen my hands. Nehemiah knows that there's real opposition as he seeks to have real impact. And so he prays for God's real strength to help him.

We've seen already that as he faces these enemies, he doesn't spend his time worked up about all the ways they might harm him. Instead, he moves on leaving justice to God. In verse 14, as I already mentioned, he just asks God to remember.

[24 : 33] He's asking God to bring full and final justice so that he does not, he trusts God with the outcome. And then we find out that the wall in verse 15 is completely finished.

Before it was just the gates and now this wall, Jerusalem, is move-in ready. There's no more refurbishing that needs to happen.

There's no more knocking down and rebuilding. And so as Nehemiah faces these things, God remains faithful to him. But then the kicker comes in verse 16.

We've already seen through 15, three places where God's enemies try to make God's people afraid. And then we find out who it is that is really supposed to be afraid. Fear is not something for God's people but for his enemies.

And that's the word we see in verse 16. When all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were what? They were afraid and felt greatly in their own esteem.

[25 : 36] In other words, it's not those who follow God choosing to go in his ways with courage and faith who need to be afraid. But it's those who do not follow God. And the reason that those who do not follow God need to be afraid is that God is bringing full and complete and final justice on the earth.

As Paul tells us in Romans 5, he is pouring out his wrath for all the sins of all the people in the world. God is that power and that judgment and that majesty that on the one hand is with his people as they follow him but on the other hand is against his enemies as they oppose him.

And so when we face the temptation to give in to fear and be afraid, verse 16 here is our final word. that the fear that is ultimate and great, the fear that should make us act quickly and speed things up is the fear of God, not the fear of man.

It's the fear of God that comes when we realize that he is the one who is most powerful. He is the one who is bringing justice. It's that fear, that knowledge that it's not that we are trying to ask other people to be good like we are good but the understanding that no one is good and Jesus alone is good that drives us to him.

God's presence and power with his people is because while on the one hand the temple represents his presence it points forward to Jesus who will one day be fully present with his people.

[27 : 10] He will come as a man and live among us for 30 years so that the temple of the Old Testament is no longer necessary. And then Jesus will die a death on a cross even though he lived a perfect life.

He'll die the death that we deserved taking on God's full and final justice for himself suffering the complete punishment and then rising again from the dead.

That is where the real power comes from and that is what our real fear should be of. The ultimate fear the great fear that these people see here is that God is with his people and the ultimate and great fear for us is that we would not be found in God's people.

And so the call as we follow God in his mission and his ways and the call that God offers to everyone is that we would embrace Jesus that we would be free from the greatest fear and that we would have the confidence that comes from knowing that there is nothing that can take away what is most important from us.

If we are in Christ following after Jesus accepting his death as the punishment for our sins and accepting his righteousness knowing that when God looks at us he sees Jesus if we are in him knowing that justification is God's free gift of grace to us then rather than be afraid we know that it is God who brings us true and full and complete peace.

[28 : 41] He is the one who goes with his people as they go on his mission. In February of 2018 just last year in Scotland there was a village farmer named Bruce Grubb and he was hosting a housewarming party he just moved into a new place apparently on a Saturday night this was on a farm and at one point he decided he needed to leave the party to go check on his pregnant cows and make sure they were okay and when he went out he saw something that disturbed him that frightened him he spotted a tiger on his property and Bruce was filled with tremendous fear he said this I was worried it was going to eat all my cows before police managed to shoot it of course he called the police local authorities jumped into action they contacted a local wildlife park to see if there were any missing animals there was a 45 minute standoff between the officers of Police Scotland and the tiger but the tiger never moved and so Bruce Grubb became suspicious at one point and he got into his truck where he would be safe and he drove up to the tiger got closer and closer and the tiger did not move even as the truck came up and Bruce finally realized that this was it was a tiger but not quite the tiger that he thought it was it was a stuffed tiger police kept the tiger to use as a mascot and Bruce Grubb was able to go back to his house and his home housewarming party when we follow God and his mission and his ways we will be tempted many times by lies that will cause us to fear and when rather than running away in fear when we come close when we see God in his power when we choose wisdom and courage over fear we will see the lie and the joke for what it is and so we follow God with wisdom and courage asking him to give us strength as Nehemiah does here in verse 9 rather than running away because of the lies and the fear that our

enemy brings to us and we do it because we have hope and confidence knowing that God is with us both in his presence and his power because what he's done for us through Jesus and so we continue to walk giving up fear and choosing wisdom and courage instead please pray with me dear father in heaven we thank you that you're with us that you give us your power and your presence and your strength we know that as we go on your mission following your ways that we will be tempted to believe things that are not true so we ask that you'd help us that you would strengthen our hands for the work that you'd keep us close to you that we would obey you and your law and that you'd remind us most of all that you are with us in Christ we ask all these things in the name of your son amen you are with us and we ask all these things on the basis of the men we ask all these things we ask to ask to unify