

Open up to Nehemiah 4. While you're turning there, let me introduce myself, if we haven't met. My name is Brandon. I'm the spiritual formation pastor here at the Dallas Campus. What that means is I get to lead the staff and love our staff underneath our campus pastor. I love it. I love this place. I love you. I love this family. I love the staff I get to work with. That makes what we're going to talk about at the end of the sermon that much more meaningful to me and, at the same time, that much more difficult for me. We'll get to that at the end of the sermon.

We are going thematically through the book of Nehemiah. If you guys remember, Nehemiah opened with him 800 miles away from Jerusalem and hearing about the walls that had been destroyed around the city. And what did he do? He broke down in tears and went straight to the Lord in prayer. Then he went and saw the walls. He saw the destruction. He saw the people of God were exposed; the temple was exposed.

Then last week, what happened? Last week we started building walls. They started the construction of the walls around the city. What we're going to do is take last week's theme of rebuilding walls, and we're going to bring it into this week. We're going to keep building walls; we're just going to add to it the reality of opposition. Let me pray, and let me ask the Lord's blessing on our time.

Father, I come to you right now. I just ask that as we look into your text, as we look into Nehemiah 4, that you might show us the majesty and the glory of your gospel, and that men and women in this room right now who need to see the comfort and protection and safety we have in Christ would see it, and those who need to see Jesus for who he is would have their eyes opened and their hearts redeemed. It's in Christ's name I pray, amen.

I have a 2-year-old son. His name is Easton. He is unbelievably aggressive. He loves to shoulder tackle Daddy. He will get a full-on sprint and then lead with the shoulder into my chest, hopefully. Sometimes he misses and catches me in the throat. It's incredibly painful. Rules for him are just sort of general guidelines, just sort of things society may or may not want to operate by, but for him they're all negotiable.

He loves to get in trouble. He really does enjoy it. When I spank him (yes, moms and dads, I do spank my children), I'll spank him, and then he will flop down onto the ground and will start slapping his tummy and go, "Spank me, Daddy! Spank me, Daddy!" I'm just going, "Don't ever say that in public, son. Okay? It does

not go well for Dad if you do." The thing about Easton is he's incredibly clingy. He wants to be held. He wants to cuddle. He wants Mom to sit there and rub his back for hours on end. He is just like Daddy.

I have a daughter. She could not be more different. She's a rule-follower. She asks over and over, "Daddy, are you in charge?"

"Yes, baby girl, Daddy is in charge."

"Am I in charge?"

"No, baby girl, you are not in charge." Over and over and over.

The thing about her is that she is hyper-independent. Her favorite phrases right now are, "You don't do it; I can do it," and "No, Daddy; I don't want to cuddle on the couch with you," which is soul crushing for me. I'm in counseling just for that right now. What we're going to see in the text in Nehemiah 4 is a man in Nehemiah who, in the face of real opposition, is both prayerful and dependent on the Lord. As my son clings to his parents, Nehemiah clings to the Lord.

Over the last week, as I've prepped for this sermon, the thing the Lord has really aggressively gotten after me about in this text and through this text is that I still have a lot more of my daughter in me than I'd ever want you to know about. I still have a lot more unholy independence in my life than I would ever want you to know. So since the Lord so aggressively got after me this week, I say let's get into the text and ask him to do the same in you.

As we go through the text, this is going to have kind of a three-part flow to it. We're just going to move right through. It's going to go opposition, response; opposition, response; Jesus wins, response. The things we're going to highlight as the text brings them up... We're going to look at this guy named Sanballat. Sanballat was the guy who was in opposition to Nehemiah. We're going to look at his life and see if there's anything we can learn from his life that might apply to us.

We're going to look at Nehemiah and see how Nehemiah responds to opposition. Then we're going to look at the wall. We're going to look at the wall they were building and see how the wall they were building is a foreshadow to the great Wall, a foreshadow to the true Wall, a foreshadow to the ultimate place of safety and security, the wall named Jesus.

Before we hit verse 1, I need to throw out a quick reference to clear some air. How many of you guys have heard at any point in your life, "Hey listen, you don't want to put walls up in your life"? I'm looking for

some hands here. This is going to get real uncomfortable. The text is going to say there are good walls and there are bad walls. The text is going to say there are walls you *need* to build and you *need* to put up, and there are walls you *don't* need to put up.

Verse 1: **"Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews."** Here's what I have to ask. Why is Sanballat so angry? Why does it matter this little country is building this wall around this little city? What does it matter to him? If I am building a fence around my house... The truth is we have a fence we're *still* building around my house. It has been going for about a year and a half. It's just a gate that's left, and I just don't want to do it. But one day.

If I'm building a fence around my house and the mayor of Dallas is furious about it, that's just weird. Right? If that's happening, someone is shady. It might be me, and it might be him, but someone in this deal is shady. Here's what we know. If we went back to Ezra 4, we'd see this letter they wrote to the king saying, "Don't let them do this, man. You don't want them building that wall. If you do, here's what's going to happen. You're going to lose money, you're going to lose power, and you don't want to do that."

Sanballat, we know, was about to become king of Samaria, and we know the Jews were being exploited. Here's what I think is going on. I think Sanballat had built walls of safety and security in his life. I think they were built out of greed. The reality is I've been a pastor in this church among you long enough to know that greed is wrecking and ravaging some of your lives. I know there are some men out there...

Listen. Greed is not a male problem, but I want to speak to the men, because I know there are some men out there who are working 70 hours a week under the umbrella of "I'm providing for my family. I'm giving them a roof. I'm giving them food. I'm taking them on vacations." All the while that you're building this bank account, you're also building walls of loneliness in your home. What your family needs... You men who, Lord willing, by his grace will be husbands and fathers one day, what families need is a husband and a father, not a roof and a fancy meal.

The root of greed is finding security outside of Jesus. The Scriptures are going to be abundantly clear that there is none. The last three months of my life will also testify that there is none. You guys may have seen that white patch I was wearing on my neck for a while, and you can see the diagonal slash right there. For about 10 months I had this bump, and they cut it out. They thought it was a cyst and sent it off to be biopsied.

Two weeks later they called back, and the opening line of that conversation was, "Hey Brandon, that thing we thought was a cyst was actually a rare malignant tumor." Later I found out it was really minor, but in the

moment I didn't know that. In that moment, when your heart is racing and your hands are shaking, a bank account, a retirement fund, will do less than nothing for your soul. I mean, it will do *nothing* for your soul.

The truth is that as much as I love my wife and my kids (and I do), there's nothing they can do for my soul either. In that moment you have the Lord. Does it mean fear wasn't real Friday and Saturday? I mean, I was afraid. I have a 3-year-old and a 2-year-old and I want to watch them grow up. I was afraid. That Sunday Steve was gone, so I covered all four of the services. I sat here during the morning. We did this. We did Communion.

At the end of the 5:00 service we did Communion, and then I stood on that floor right there and I exploded into tears, just going, "I believe this stuff. I believe this gospel. I believe this resurrection. I believe this Jesus. I believe this stuff." That was the gospel settling deep into my soul. In those moments, and in those days, when you get that call (and one day we all get that call), walls built by the gospel stand.

Listen to me. Cash will never stand in the face of cancer. *Never*. Jesus does. Jesus stands in the face of cancer. Walls built by greed collapse when you get that call. Walls built by the gospel are the only ones that do and will ever stand. Let's keep reading. Verse 2: **"And he said in the presence of his brothers and of the army of Samaria..."** This is still in the opposition, and this is out in public. There's no, "Hey, let's go man to man. Let's go face to face." No one on one. No "Why don't we go to your office." This is right out in front of the brothers and the army.

"What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore it for themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish up in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, and burned ones at that? Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, 'Yes, what they are building—if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall!'"

This was out in public, open-hand humiliation. The question we need to ask is (and I think it's a fair one)...*Is the church today still treated the way the Israelites were then?* The answer is yes. Now, there are parts of the world where there's more of a protective shell around those who love Jesus, but you can go to prayerformartyrs.org and find out this bubble we live in in Dallas is not the global norm, that there is a Bible-belt, Christian street-cred shelter we have that's going away, and it's going away fast.

My home group leader is an accountant, a good one, and a couple of months ago he got fired. He got fired because he wouldn't take a job to be an accountant in the sex trade industry. Here's what I'm not saying, so don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying in 20 years all Christians are going to be unemployed. What I *am* saying is that the culture and the context and the society we live in is growing increasingly hostile to selected values from Jesus.

The values that flow out of "God is love" offend no one. The values that flow out of "God is holy" offend everyone. This is heartbreaking, because it's the collision of divine holiness and divine love that makes the cross so beautiful. That divine love that invites the world to God, that divine holiness that demands all sin be paid for, collide on the cross.

This collision is why I can look at my neighbors, Steve and Homer, who live directly across the street from me, and I can say to them, "Hey look, man. You guys are welcome into my home any time you want. There is no night where you're not free to come have dinner with me. There is no night where you're not free to come and sit and hang and play with my kids. But your life, same-sex marriage? I can't say that I bless that." Because God is both holy and loving. He is both love and holy.

That will not make you popular at the office if you spout that out on Monday, so we should look at Nehemiah and see how he responded to this opposition. Verse 4: **"Hear, O our God, for we are despised."** His first response is prayer. The truth is, historically, that has not been my leading response to life. I've always been much more of a "build first, pray as I go" kind of guy. But not Nehemiah, and I pray the Lord is crushing that in me and cultivating that out of me.

That being said, Nehemiah's prayer is a little bit perplexing, if you will. Let's read it. **"Turn back their taunt on their own heads and give them up to be plundered in a land where they are captives. Do not cover their guilt, and let not their sin be blotted out from your sight, for they have provoked you to anger in the presence of the builders."** This prayer is a little bit confusing in light of "Bless those who persecute you." And Peter: "How many times do I forgive?" Jesus: "Not seven; seventy-seven." It seems like there's a bit of a biblical contradiction going on here.

Here's what I think is going on. I think what we have is not a theological prescription on how to pray. I think Nehemiah's humanity is being revealed. I think Nehemiah is sitting there, and he's just going, "We Jews have struggled and suffered for a long time. Captivity felt like forever. We were battled over rebuilding the temple, and now we're being battled over rebuilding the wall. Lord, is this ever going to end? Is there ever going to be a day when we can just rest and enjoy and we're not being attacked from all sides?"

I have no doubt in a room this size, in a room of this many people, that many of us have been there. If we haven't been there, we *will* be there. I have a great friend of mine who I called on Friday. "How are you doing?" "Man, I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired. I'm just sick and tired of this, man." When you're there, when that's you, I want you free. I want you to feel free to follow the model of the Psalms.

In the Psalms we see these men going, "Lord, where are you? I can't find you. I can't see you. I need you. I trust you. I can't find you. Lord, where you are? I need you. I trust you." That's the rhythm we're to be in. The Lord is not after us pretending before him that we're better than we are. He already knows. What the Lord is after is not you lying to him, but you coming to him. He's after you lying down before the feet of the Father and saying, "I need you. I need you in the middle of this. I'm desperate, Lord. I need you."

Praying is not all they did. Verse 6: **"So we built the wall. And all the wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work."** There are two things in this verse that just sort of sprung out that I want you guys to see. First, the Hebrew here literally is the heart of the people was to do the work. The Jews were building this wall as an overflow of God's heart to build walls. God's heart was always to build a place of ultimate safety, of ultimate security, and that's who Jesus is. That's what he did in sending the Son.

In the Son, he bought for us a place where we are free now to live lives of risk because we have safety with Jesus. We'll come back to that. In Romans 8, if I could just summarize... Romans 8 is this beautiful passage. It starts with, "There's no condemnation for those in Christ," and moves on to saying you have this "Abba, Father," and that all things in your life are making you like Christ. Then at the end it says, "And nothing...not sword, not famine, not death...nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ."

Romans 8's point is that there is no safer place for your soul than with Jesus. We have these little pings inside of our souls that say to us, "Life is not as it should be. Life is not right. There has to be more to life than this." I wanted today to preach from an iPad. I wanted this to be my preaching launch into the paperless world. But when I uploaded my notes in there and it shrunk them down a little bit, I couldn't see it. Like I couldn't read them. That was a flag that something is off.

So my family loaded up. We went to Visionworks, or whatever it was called, and we started looking at glasses. I felt like they were way overpriced and I was getting ripped and I didn't want them, so we left. The point is I had a flag and I have to do something about it. You have these little flags inside your soul, and you can't suppress them forever. They will kill you. You can't ignore them forever. They're screaming out to you, "Come to Jesus. Right now, come to him. In this room, in this moment. You don't have to leave. We'll shut this sermon down." No, I won't. But you come to him anyway. Right now. You're being invited to Christ in this room. Don't ignore them.

The other thing in this little verse is that rebuilding walls took a team. We don't rebuild alone. It takes a community. Walls you build by yourself don't last very long. Too many of you are playing a religious game in this room right now. You come in week after week after week with a smile on your face, and you sit and

hear sermon after sermon after sermon, and in six months you come into my office and say, "My marriage has been a disaster from day one." Why didn't you say something?

I had that tumor on my neck. For 10 months I had this purple bump sticking out, and I would take my wife's makeup and cover it up because I didn't want you to see it. Some of you men out there are judging me for doing that. I understand. I would judge you if you did the same thing. You have these spiritual tumors in your life, and you won't take the makeup off. Are you afraid of us knowing who you already know yourself to be? Let me assure you, the Lord already knows, and the Lord is inviting you to freedom.

When you build gospel walls, you stop building walls of shame and rejection in your life, and you start building walls of joy and acceptance, but the first step is coming to Jesus. Let's keep going. Verse 7: **"But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and that the breaches were beginning to be closed, they were very angry. And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it."**

I need you to see this. In verse 1 it's just the Samaritan army. Now they have them surrounded. That's north, east, south, and west. So it's getting back. If you think back to Nehemiah's prayer, it was, "Lord, turn them back on their own heads." His prayer was, "Lord, get them out of here. Get them out of my sight. Get them away from us." Now they're all around them. Here's what you need to know. Even in his prayer, it's still getting worse.

Too often, so often, you and I... You're not alone. I'm guilty too. We ask the Lord for something, we pray for it, we don't get the answer we want, and we bail. Not Nehemiah, praise God. Verse 9: **"And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night."** He has the same attack strategy. "Pray first; build second."

Often when historic sin goes on repeat in our lives, the first time we cry out to God. We're screaming out to God. Then we start building good gospel walls. The second time it comes back, we cry out a little bit less. We build a little bit better walls. By the third time, usually it's pretty easy just to quit crying out and just build walls in our lives. Nehemiah knows this is an exercise in vanity. Walls that last in our lives are walls built by God, and walls built by God in our lives are walls built by prayer. We're to be men and women who come first in prayer, and then we build second.

While they're praying, they set up protection day and night. I want to read you a quote from a commentary. It said the Jews prayed, but at the same time they put out a watch so they were not trapped unaware by their enemies. It was indeed a dangerous situation. The New Testament describes a dangerous situation

for the church. Ephesians 6: "...stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood..." Satan is a liar...always has been, always will be.

There are spiritual enemies attacking the church, day in, day out, and that includes you, the reality is, even right now in this moment. If we're to set a guard day and night, it means we can never let the guard down, and we have to live with both offensive and defensive approaches. I wrote down a list of a few things on the offensive list and defensive list. I'm going to read it to you. These are my lists. These are not your lists. You pray and ask the Lord, "What's this to be? How am I to go about pursuing stirring affection for Christ?" in your own life, but in my life here are a few things I use to try to stir affection.

I have a Greek club. We meet on Wednesday mornings at 6:00. We do Greek, so we don't have a lot of friends. It's just the few of us hanging out at a coffee shop. I love those men, and I love getting deep into the Scriptures with them. I love those men. I do. They stir my affection. None of us know what we're doing except Johnny Reck. He was here at 9:00. It doesn't matter. Okay. I love good coffee. Some of you, you guys who have known me for a while, know this is new in my life. A year ago I was openly mocking coffee. The Lord converted me, and I'm grateful for it.

My home group... I love my home group. It took about six months before I even really wanted to go to home group, where I would wake up on Friday going, "I want to be there tonight," but I'm glad I stuck with them and stuck with it. Friday night we didn't have it, and I missed them. I wanted to have home group on Friday night. They stir my affection for Christ. Dinner with good friends, with good wine, having good conversation is an affection-stirrer in my life.

Early mornings with the Bible, coffee, and prayer. Exercise. I put exercise in here not because I'm so good at it, but because I'm trying to create some accountability by telling you I do. Now I have to go do it. Feel free to ask me at any point about that one down the road. Skiing. This is the last one. I love skiing. I'm not good. If we're ever on the same mountain, you don't want to be on the same slope with me. It's a dangerous situation. But there's little that stirs my affection more than being at the top of a mountain covered in snow, looking down. I love it.

Now the defensive list. Here are the few of the walls I try to build in my life to make sure I'm not inviting sin into my life. One is getting to bed early. I do wrestle with that. I'll be honest. There are a lot of nights where I struggle just getting to sleep early. I'll lay there and stare at the ceiling for what feels like four days. Avoiding too much TV. My wife and I aren't anti-TV. We watch a few shows together. Is there anyone who watches *Chicago Fire*? It's a great show. She watches a show called *Downton Abbey*. I don't get it. I don't understand it. I tried one of them. It didn't make any sense, so I moved on.

Guarding my Sabbath, getting rest. Then, ignoring lies from Satan; consciously, actively ignoring lies from Satan. There are many great lies he lies. One of the lies some of you in this room may or may not be believing right now is that you have to build up walls of morality before you can come to Jesus. It's simply not true. You will find us, including myself, at The Village Church not a perfect people, and we don't have imaginary marriages. We have a perfect Jesus though. Verse 10:

"In Judah it was said, 'The strength of those who bear the burdens is failing. There is too much rubble. By ourselves we will not be able to rebuild the wall.' And our enemies said, 'They will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work.' At that time the Jews who lived near them came from all directions and said to us ten times, 'You must return to us.'"

Opposition is going internal here. The Jews are looking around, and they're just going, "Man, there's just too much. The rubble is too much. There's no way, Lord. We can't do this." Behind the scenes they're saying, "Hey listen, if we're all building the wall, who's going to grow the crops? If we're not growing crops, how are we going to eat? If we're not growing crops, how are we going to pay for the land?" They felt overwhelmed by their situation.

I know, again, in a room this size many of us today right now probably feel just the way the Jews did. We're sitting here going, "Our marriage is too far gone, Brandon. You don't understand. There is no hope. It's just too far gone." "My child has been in rehab and there's no end in sight." "Am I ever going to find a husband?" "Am I ever going to find a wife?"

You may be sitting with cancer in the room right now, just going, "I don't see any way out of this." Maybe it's just your own sin that keeps coming back over and over and over and over. You feel like you are warring inside of yourself, and it's a war you feel like you can never win. If that's you, I think Nehemiah has something to say to you.

"So in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, in open places, I stationed the people by their clans, with their swords, their spears, and their bows. And I looked and arose and said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, 'Do not be afraid of them.'" Listen to this.
"Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes."

Nehemiah's call was to remember the Lord. "Remember how I promised I'm going to crush the head of the Serpent. Remember the Exodus, where you were in captivity, in slavery in Egypt. Remember how I delivered you out of that. Remember how I promised you a Messiah." His call to us, his call to me and to

you, is to remember Jesus, to remember the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Remember how God in his mercy and by his grace chased you down.

There was nothing in you, there was nothing in me at 22, that the Lord innately needed. It was his mercy and his grace. There's nothing in you that the Lord said, "I need that guy. If the church doesn't have him, or the church doesn't have her..." It was a complete act of mercy and grace by God that he ever ran any of us down. The way this passage is going to close, the way the rest of this text is going to close... It's going to close with the Jews rebuilding the walls, fighting their enemies. That's the story of the gospel.

The story of the gospel is that in the cross of Christ, Jesus paid for our sin, and in paying for our sin, he built the perfect wall, the place where there's absolute safety, the place where there is no harm that could ever come to us, the place where Romans 8 can be lived out in our lives. In his resurrection, he defeated death and Satan, our great Enemy. We're called to build walls. We're called to remember Jesus and go build walls in our lives, in our city, to the ends of the earth.

The way I want to close is with one way The Village Church is trying to remember the gospel and go build walls. You guys heard Brady talk about it during the announcements. We believe in church planting. We believe in starting new walls, new churches, in Dallas, Dubai, Chicago, the ends of the earth. We believe, and I believe with great conviction, I believe with every cell in my body, that the church is the invisible kingdom made visible, and that we're called to display and model the grace and glory and mercy of God and make Christ seen.

I've wanted to church plant for a long time, but there were walls that needed to get rebuilt in my life. There were walls of insecurity, walls of fear. I needed men to come into my life and speak into my life, and I needed the Lord to crush and rebuild these walls. Six months ago, Steve Hardin, our campus pastor, who we know and love, came and said, "Brandon, as your elder and as your overseer, I'm telling you I heard from the Lord and it's time."

Y'all who know Steve, you know that if you walk by a whiteboard and he's drawing an org chart, you just smile and give him a hug and move on. (Some of you guys got that. Some of y'all think I'm being rude. It is what it is.) But when Steve Hardin says, "I heard from the Lord," you listen. I felt like in that moment the Sovereign God of the universe spoke.

My wife and I began praying over New York, Boston, Dubai, and Chicago. In December, while we were in Chicago, we just felt like the Lord gave us a glimpse of his heart for the city. It was a glimpse of his heart, that in 25 years, this city ravaged by crime and violence would see a thriving, gospel-centered, Christ-exalting church in every single neighborhood.

So later this year we're going to load up a U-Haul, and we're going to head to Chicago, and we're going to plant a church that, Lord willing, will see that come to fruition. We're going to give our lives to building a new wall of the gospel in a city that so desperately needs it, this beautiful and broken city, inviting them to the safety and security we have in Jesus.

We'll talk a lot more in the weeks and months to come about how you guys can support it, be a part of it. Some of you are going to love living in Chicago, but we'll get to that later. For right now I just ask that you'd pray, that you'd pray for us and you'd pray with us, that you'd pray that the gospel would go out and flourish in the city of Chicago as we at The Village continue to labor to try to build gospel-centered, Christ-exalting walls in the city of Dallas, in Chicago, to the ends of the earth, and inside of us.

Father, I come right now asking that you would be incredibly merciful to men and women, my brothers and sisters in this room, who are sitting here...I described the person who just feels like the world is crashing down...who need you to reach out and grab hold of them, who need the mercy and grace of God in this room right now.

I pray for those men and women in this room who are sitting here who are apart from Jesus who know, "I have this thing flying off inside of me saying, 'I need something more. There has to be more.'" I want them to know the invitation to come to Jesus is on the table right here and right now. I love you. I praise you. I thank you for this family, for my family. It's in Christ's name I pray, amen.