

Nehemiah 6 — I Am Doing a Great Work — Nehemiah on the Wall, the Plain of Ono, the Hired Prophet, and the Fear That Would Not Land

Nehemiah 6: with the wall of Jerusalem nearly complete and only the gates left to hang, Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem the Arabian shift from attacking the work to attacking the worker — luring Nehemiah to the plain of Ono, publishing an open letter of slander, and hiring the prophet Shemaiah to frighten him into the temple; Nehemiah refuses every trap, the wall is finished in fifty-two days on the twenty-fifth of Elul, and even the enemies perceive it was wrought of God; Nehemiah's governorship under Artaxerxes, c. 445 BC (scriptural chronology; scholars concur, c. 445 BC).

The wall is almost done. That is the whole tension of this chapter, and you have to feel how close it is to catch what happens next. Nehemiah tells us in the opening breath that the enemies "heard that I had builded the wall, and that there was no breach left therein" — the stonework is closed all the way around Jerusalem — "though at that time I had not set up the doors upon the gates" (v. 1). One task remains. Not a wall to raise, just doors to hang. And it is exactly here, on the last lap, that the opposition changes shape.

Hebrew Word Studies

gadol (H1419) (גָּדוֹל) — **great, large, mighty — high in importance or magnitude v. 3.** When Nehemiah says "I am doing a great work," the adjective is *gadol*, and its résumé in the Old Testament tells you exactly how heavy a word he has chosen. It is the "great light" that rules the day (Gen. 1:16), the "great nation" God promises Abraham (Gen. 12:2), the "great and terrible wilderness" of the wandering (Deut. 8:15), and the LORD himself who is "great, and greatly to be praised" (Ps. 48:1). To file the wall under *gadol* is to put it in the same category as covenant, creation, and the acts of God — not a civic construction project but a sacred one. And that classification is what makes the refusal effortless: a man is only pulled off his work by something he secretly ranks higher than the work. Nehemiah has already done the ranking. The invitations to Ono are not evil enough to refuse on their face; they are simply *smaller*, and once the work is *gadol*, smaller is reason enough. It is the same instinct behind "seek ye first the kingdom of God" (Matt. 3:33 JST; Matt. 6:33) — not that everything else is wicked, but that one thing is great, and greatness sets the order of the day.

chazaq (H2388) (חָזַק) — **to be strong, to strengthen, to seize, to hold fast v. 9.** *Chazaq* is a muscular word — it means to grow firm, to take a grip, to fortify. It is the verb of "be strong and of a good courage" spoken to Joshua on the threshold of the land (Josh. 1:9), and, hauntingly, the verb for Pharaoh's heart that God "*hardened*," made rigid, against Israel (Ex. 9:12). Here Nehemiah aims it at his own hands: "O God, *strengthen* my hands." The genius of the prayer is that it answers the enemies' plan in their own vocabulary. They intend that his hands "shall be weakened" (a different root, *raphah*, to sink, to let drop); he asks that they be made *chazaq* instead. Nehemiah is not asking for the trial to end — he is asking to be held firm inside it, to keep his grip on the work while the pressure tries to pry his fingers loose. It is the same petition Paul makes when he asks to be "strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man" (Eph. 3:16), and the same promise the Lord gives the anxious: "I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee" (Isa. 41:10). The Hebrew even lets the wall itself preach: an unfinished wall and a frightened builder both need the same thing, to be made *chazaq*, and only the God who steadies stone can steady the hands that lay it.

yare (H3372) (יָרָא) — **to fear, to be afraid, to dread vv. 9, 13, 14.** *Yare* is the pulse of this chapter's opposition. It is the word for the enemies' entire strategy — they "made us *afraid*" (v. 9), Shemaiah was hired "that I should be *afraid*" (v. 13), and the whole prophetic chorus "would have put me in *fear*" (v. 14). Fear is not a byproduct of the schemes; it *is* the schemes. And that reframes the battle entirely: the wall was never really in danger — Nehemiah's nerve was. The same verb, though, is the one Israel is commanded to reserve for God alone: "thou shalt *fear* the LORD thy God" (Deut. 6:13), for "the *fear* of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov. 9:10). There lies the deliverance. A heart already full of the fear of God has no more room to be filled with the fear of Sanballat; reverence crowds out dread. It is John's promise made practical: "perfect love casteth out *fear*" (1 Jn. 4:18), and the Lord's steadying word to Joseph Smith in Liberty Jail, that "fear not what man can do, for God shall be with you forever and ever" (D&C 122:9). Nehemiah's enemies spent good money to manufacture fear, and it simply would not land — because the man they were trying to frighten already feared Someone else.

shalam (H7999) (שָׁלַם) — **to be complete, finished, whole; to be at peace, made perfect v. 15.** "So the wall was *finished*" — and the verb is *shalam*, from the great root that gives us *shalom*. Its core is not merely "to end" but "to be whole, complete,

sound, at peace." So the finished wall is not just a stopped project; it is Jerusalem made *whole* again, its long breach closed, its peace restored. The same root reaches into the heart in Solomon's charge to "let your heart therefore be *perfect* [*shalem*] with the LORD our God" (1 Kgs. 8:61), and into worship as the "peace offering" (*shelem*) that celebrates a restored relationship. There is a deep logic in the choice of word: the whole chapter has been a war over whether the work would be *broken off* — the enemies wanted it to "cease" (v. 3), to leave a permanent breach in both the wall and the builder's resolve. *Shalom* is the flat refusal of that outcome. The work was not interrupted; it was completed, made whole, brought to *shalom*. It is a small foretaste of the larger promise that the God who "hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Philip. 1:6) — the God who does not leave his walls half-built.

From the Chapter's Architecture

Two threads hold the panels together. One is the verb yare, fear, which the enemies deploy in every wave — it is named in verses 9, 13, 14, and 19, the strategy stated four times over. The other is the contest between two verbs of hands: the enemies scheme that Nehemiah's hands "shall be weakened from the work" (v. 9), and Nehemiah prays that God would "strengthen my hands" (v. 9). Everything in the chapter is a struggle over whether one man's hands stay on the wall or come off it. They stay. And because they stay, the last verb the chapter needs is shalom — the work made whole. The structure is not symmetry; it is a straight line from threat to completion, with the builder's steady hands as the spine that runs the length of it.