

Have you ever felt overlooked, or unfavored?

- You did not get that promotion.
- You suspect that your spouse does not love you.

Think of Leah: Jacob was deceived on his wedding night.

- Jacob thought he was marrying Rachel, but they swapped Leah for Rachel on the wedding night.
- Jacob's love for Rachel was greater than his love for Leah (Ge 29:30).

Or **remember Jephthah** (Judges 11)? Jephthah was rejected by his brothers because his mother was a prostitute.

Both **Leah and Jephthah** lived without favor, without deep connection.

- **Leah** went on to become Judah's mother – the Messianic line.
- **Jephthah** became a judge of Israel and delivered Israel from the Ammonites.

Conversely, **receiving favor** is wonderful!

- Think of Mary. A nobody from some backwater village until an angel appears and says, 'Greeting, you who are highly favored (Lk 1:28 NIV).'

Today's theme in Ezra-Nehemiah is of God's favor.

Ezra mentions God's gracious hand four times. The key verse is: 'The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him, but his great anger is against all who forsake him (Ezra 8:22 NLT).'

- **God promises favor**, *but* it is conditional – we must wholeheartedly love him.
- The very **first commandment** is 'you will have no other gods before me (Ex 20:3).'

Today, we begin the book of Nehemiah. **Nehemiah mentions** favor five times, three in today's portion.¹ **The wall** that Nehemiah is called to build is about purity, obedience and favor.

God's favor follows those who guard their hearts. When we build walls of obedience, His gracious hand builds what we cannot.

¹ Ez 7:9, 8:18, 22, 9:8, Ne 2:8, 18, 9:17, 31.

- If we **don't build a wall around** our hearts, *the world* will build them for us – walls of distraction, compromise, and quiet drift.

Favor
Nehemiah 1-2



Nehemiah was in the 'citadel of Susa.' The site of Esther's story, in what is now SW Iran, when he gets sad news.

1. Sad News, 1:1-4.

His brother, **Hanani** visited him from Jerusalem and said, 'Things are not going well for those who returned to the province of Judah. They are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem has been torn down, and the gates have been destroyed by fire (Ne 1:3 NLT).'

Jerusalem's walls were torn down roughly 140 years earlier, during the *very first* attack and deportation.²

- On the **one hand**, this story is about a wall, a wall of **protection** that brings dignity to the city.
- On the **other hand**, it is about **the apathy** of *not doing* what God asked of His people. They were **being disobedient** and in danger of compromising their faith with the gods of the other nations.

Walls are funny things: they can keep *bad people* out or they can keep *good people* in.

- For example, The **Great wall of China** was to keep the Mongolians out and the **Berlin wall** was to keep East Germans from getting out.
- **The Japanese** desire harmony more than self-expression. Their goal is to be considerate of others and their dignity to preserve society's peace. So, they build an outward wall – a wall in front (tatamae) – to protect others and self.
- Their true self (honne) – bone self – inner feelings are considered private to be shared generally.

We can **choose to build good or bad walls** around our hearts.

We can build a **wall around the secret areas** of their life – our sin and compromise.

We can build a **wall to keep evil outside** our hearts.

² Edwin M Yamauchi, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: 1 Chronicles-Job, Vol. 4*, Revised Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 466.

- Let's not keep evil hidden away in the closet of our heart, but let's expose those areas to the sunlight of God's grace.
- Solomon wrote 'Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it (Pro 4:23).' Let's set a guard on our heart to keep evil out.
- God's favor follows those who guard their hearts. When we build walls of obedience, His gracious hand builds what we cannot.

The euphoria of the initial work wore off, and **the work stopped** due to political pressure (Ez 4:7-23) and now the people do not care.

'When I heard this, I sat down and wept. In fact, for days I mourned, fasted, and prayed to the God of heaven (Ne 1:4 NLT).'

What is your first response to bad news? Is it to pray?

2. Prayer, Ne 1:5-11.

Nehemiah's first response was to pray and fast for several days. His formal prayer is an example for us.

Prayer in four parts. Know who ...

1. **God is:** 'O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps his covenant of unfailing love ... (Ne 1:5a NLT).' Nehemiah **fully believes** they will receive mercy.
 2. **We are:** 'with those who love him and obey his commands (Ne 1:5b NLT).' Nehemiah reminds God that they are His people, His own family. He confesses that they sinned and were unfaithful.
 3. **God's promise:** 'If you are unfaithful to me, I will scatter you among the nations. ⁹But if you return to me and obey my commands and live by them ... I will bring you back to the place I have chosen for my name to be honored (Ne 1:8-9 NLT).'
- **God 'takes away** her *most precious possessions*, her temple and land ... these are **returned** when she repents and fulfills her obligations.³
 - The prophet Jeremiah said that Judah was like bad & good figs (Jer 24:2-3). The bad ones were so bad you could not eat them. But the good ones were very good. These good ones are the people exiled to Babylon. These good ones are promised to return.

³ Hannah K. Harrington, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah NICOT* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2022), 281.

4. Ask boldly: 'Please hear my prayer! ... Please grant me success today by making the king favorable to me. Put it into his heart to be kind to me (Ne 1:11 NLT).'

Nehemiah knows **this will be a big ask**: Artaxerxes will have to *overturn his prior stop work order* (Ez 4:21). But God's gracious hand can move even a stubborn king's heart.

After his prayer, he says humbly, 'I was the king's cup-bearer (1:11).' A **cupbearer** was more than a wine taster who checked for poison.

- He had **authority** and at times even commanded troops.
- He '**enjoyed the king's confidence** and was influential in determining who could have access to him.'⁴
- Like **Esther before** him, God had especially placed him in this position for this time.

After four months of prayer, he approaches the king.⁵

- Four months! There is something to be said about **praying and waiting** for four months.
- Later, Nehemiah connects **patience** with the Holy Spirit's work (9:30).

One day, he knew the time was right.

3. Favor, Ne 2:1-9.

Nehemiah was serving king Artaxerxes and **he looked sad**. The king asked him the reason for his sadness.

'Then I was terrified, ³but I replied, "Long live the king! How can I not be sad? For the city where my ancestors are buried is in ruins, and the gates have been destroyed by fire." ⁴The king asked, "Well, how can I help you (Ne 2:2-4 NLT)?'''

- Note, he **did not blurt out Jerusalem** but instead appealed to the desecration of his family's burial ground – something the Persians respected.⁶ He found common ground.

Nehemiah pauses for an **under the breath prayer**: 'With a prayer to the God of heaven, ⁵I replied (Ne 2:4 NLT).' Many times, we see him pray **spontaneously** (1:4, 6, 2:4, 4:4, 9, 6:9, 14, 13:14).

Nehemiah requests

⁴ Harrington, *NICOT*, 283.

⁵ Yamauchi, *Expo*, 470.

⁶ Yamauchi, *Expo*, 471.

- To **be sent to Judah** to 'rebuild the city (v. 5).' The king and queen only asked how long he would be gone. Amazing favor.
- To have **letters** for the governor for safe travel (v. 7).
- To have a **letter** for building materials (v. 8).

And then we see God's great hand of favor: 'And the king granted these requests, because the gracious hand of God was on me (Ne 2:8 NLT).'

Three weeks ago, I told you a brief story of when God led me to be the youth pastor at a home mission's church rather than be the assistant pastor of a mega-church. This was so I could continue in graduate school. Unfortunately, my pay was so bad I had to withdraw from the school.

I went to the office to officially withdraw when they called me into the back office. I sat down and explained that I did not have enough money to continue my education. I thanked the lady and stood up to leave. She said, 'can you do half of the tuition?' I sat back down and thought about it and said, 'no.' Again, I stood up to leave. She said, 'can you do 10%?' I sat down for a third time and said, 'no.' She looked at me and said, 'You have great grades and you are the type of scholar we want to produce. I am going to give you a complete scholarship for this your last year.' I was astounded at the favor I had found.

I had such favor, I jokingly told Connie when I got home, 'If I had sat down a fourth time, she might have paid me to continue.'

David wrote, 'Surely, Lord, you bless the righteous; you surround them with your favor as with a shield (Ps 5:12 NIV).'

The story continues ...

4. Walls, Ne 2:11-18.

Nehemiah **travels to Jerusalem** and patiently waits for three days. Then, under the **cover of night** he inspects the ruins of the city walls.

If Nehemiah inspected the walls of your heart today, what would he find?

- Distracted.
- Compromised.
- Quietly drifting away from God?

The people, these good figs that have been especially selected and cared for in Persia *are in danger* of going bad.

- They are **living in fear** among those who worship other Gods.
- They are **intermarrying with people** who do not worship the living God.
- They are **again disobedient** and gave in too easily to the local politics.
- Friends, we must guard our hearts against compromise.

He kept **his mission a secret** until he had a plan. God gives leaders vision. ‘Then I said to them, “You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace.” ¹⁸I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me (Ne 2:17-18 NLT).’

I can hear the **local Jewish leaders thinking** ‘this will never work. There will be intense opposition, and it is a huge job. Where would we get the money?’

- It took an **outsider like Nehemiah** to shake them up, to lead them **away from sin** and *back to obedience*.
- What won the Jewish leaders over was **Nehemiah’s personal testimony**: ‘the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said (v. 18).’

Friends, sometimes it is **difficult to see God’s favor**. We can only be **responsible for our part**. As it says in Hebrews: ‘let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ²fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith (He 12:1-2 NIV).’

‘They replied, “Let us start rebuilding.” So they began this good work (Ne 2:18 NLT).’

Any advance of God’s kingdom, our daily obedience, will encounter a response from the Evil One.

5. Opposition, Ne 2:19-20.

‘But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. “What is this you are doing?” they asked. “Are you rebelling against the king?” ²⁰I answered them by saying, “The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it (Ne 2:10, 19-20 NLT).”’

‘When God extends favor, one can expect **opposition even from close quarters**⁷ – because that is who Satan uses.

⁷ Harrington, NICOT, 289.

- They were **thinking of themselves** over the whole community, as is often the case.
- Perhaps, they were **thinking of their own influence** or position rather than the community.

This is **why we need walls** of obedience and worship, to not get distracted. Look at Nehemiah's response:

- God will give us success.
- We will rebuild.
- You have no share in this.

Nehemiah was **determined not to redo the mistakes** of earlier returnees.

Conclusion.

God's favor follows those who guard their hearts. When we build walls of obedience, His gracious hand builds what we cannot.

Do you want God's favor for you and your family?

- Obey Him.
- Seek Him.
- Guard your heart.
- Favor follows faithfulness.
- In my case, the decision to obey God and finish graduate school has been more of blessing than if I had been selfish and served that mega-church.

Believe in God; have faith in him. 'He rewards those who earnestly seek him (He 11:6 NIV).'

Communion is the place where we examine the walls of our heart and return to the One whose favor was purchased by Jesus' blood.

Communion.

'For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, ²⁴and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes ... ²⁸*Everyone ought to examine themselves* before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup (1Co 11:23-28 NIV).'

Oh, I have not given you the key verse for Nehemiah. It's one you all know: 'Don't be dejected and sad, for the joy of the Lord is your strength (Ne 8:10 NLT)!' Nehemiah sadness was turned to joy.