

## **Building the Builder #1**

Brian Carroll / General Adult

Work in Progress / Nehemiah 1:1–5

In Nehemiah 1:1–6, we see a leader whose first response to brokenness is not action, but prayer that lingers. Nehemiah doesn't rush past grief or seek quick solutions; he sits with the burden and returns to God again and again. His persistence in prayer reveals that God is shaping his heart long before He assigns him a task. Before the wall can rise, God patiently forms a man who knows how to wait on Him.

### **Introduction**

- In 1994, Mauro Prosperi lined up at the start of one of the most brutal races on earth: the Marathon des Sables. (*Mara-tahn de Sahbl*)
  - It's an ultramarathon run across the Sahara Desert, hundreds of miles of sand, heat, and exposure. Competitors don't just run.
  - They survive while running.
- Prosperi was experienced and conditioned.
  - He was well-prepared.
  - During his training he had even conditioned himself to get used to a lack of water and dehydration.
  - This wasn't reckless ambition. He knew what he was doing.
- At least until a freak sandstorm came.
  - Not a dramatic movie moment.
  - Not a single gust of wind - this was a sustained, disorienting wall of sand that erased visibility, swallowed sound, and wiped away every marker that told runners where they were supposed to go.
  - Footprints vanished almost instantly.
  - The horizon became a blur of sameness.

- For fear of being buried if he stayed still during the storm, he kept running for 8 hours.
- When the storm passed, Mauro realized something terrifying.
  - He was alone.
  - Off course.
  - And completely disoriented.
- At first, he did what made sense.
  - He tried to reason his way forward.
  - He picked a direction and started walking.
  - But the desert has a way of humbling logic.
  - Every dune looks like the last.
  - Every step feels productive until you realize you have no idea whether you're moving toward safety or deeper into danger.
- Eventually, the race ended without him.
  - Rescue teams searched the official route.
  - Helicopters scanned the expected areas.
  - But Mauro wasn't there. He was far beyond where anyone thought to look.
- For nine days, he wandered the Sahara.
- Here's the part that matters for us.
- Mauro didn't survive because he knew where he was going.
  - He survived because when direction was gone, he focused on what kept him alive.
  - He rationed water with obsessive care.
  - He moved at dawn and dusk instead of burning energy in the heat.

- He sheltered when the sun was brutal.
- He made the same small, disciplined decisions over and over again, not because they felt heroic, but because they were necessary.
- Persistence, in that environment, wasn't dramatic.
  - It was repetitive.
  - Intentional.
  - Unseen by everyone else.
  - And there were moments when despair closed in.
  - At one point, convinced he would die, Mauro carved his name into stone.
  - He recorded final words to his family.
  - He reached the edge of hope.
    - Taking his pocket knife, he attempted to slit his wrists, however, when he awoke the next morning, he was still very much alive.
    - He was so dehydrated, the wounds clotted instead of bled.
  - This certainly wasn't a moment of spiritual clarity, but the depth of human despair.
    - You can't help but see God's mercy at work in preserving his life despite his despair.
    - However, that failed attempt at suicide did change his perspective.
    - He regained his confidence and he continued on.
- Each day, he did the same thing again and again.
  - Conserved strength by walking in the cooler parts of the day.
  - Scanned the horizon. Put one foot in front of the other.
  - Not because he felt confident, but because quitting would guarantee the end.

- Persistence wasn't about progress.
  - It was about refusal to abandon what sustained him.
  - Eventually, after nine days, Mauro stumbled upon a small settlement.
  - Against all odds, he was alive. The desert had not changed.
  - The danger had not softened.
  - But his persistence in doing the right things, even when he had no assurance they were working, made the difference.
- And here's why that matters.
  - I doubt that any of us in this room will ever be confronted with the need to survive being lost in the Sahara.
  - The closest survival situation we face is a traffic jam on I-75
  - But, we do live in seasons of spiritual disorientation.
- Moments when the path forward is unclear.
  - When circumstances don't improve.
  - When answers don't come quickly.
  - When prayer doesn't seem to change the landscape around us.
- That's where many people stop praying.
  - Not because they stop believing, but because they stop seeing results.
  - They assume prayer is only effective when it produces immediate movement.
  - When clarity comes fast.
  - When walls start rising or problems start shrinking.
- But prayer, like survival in the desert, is often not about knowing the way forward.
  - It's about staying anchored to what keeps you alive while you wait for God to make the way clear.

- That’s the kind of persistence we meet at the beginning of Nehemiah.
- Nehemiah hears devastating news.
  - The walls are broken.
  - The gates are burned. The people are in shame.
  - And what does he do?
- He doesn’t rush into action.
  - He doesn’t demand instant answers.
  - He doesn’t assume clarity will come overnight.
  - He sits down.
  - He weeps.
  - He fasts.
- And he prays — for days.
  - Nehemiah persists in prayer not because the situation improves, but because prayer is what keeps him oriented when everything else is falling apart.
  - And that’s where our text begins.

### **Scripture Reading**

#### **Nehemiah 1:1–6 ESV**

<sup>1</sup> The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the citadel,

<sup>2</sup> that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem.

<sup>3</sup> And they said to me, “The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire.”

<sup>4</sup> As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

<sup>5</sup> And I said, “O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments,

<sup>6</sup> let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father’s house have sinned.

- Before the Christmas season began, we were working through the books of Ezra & Nehemiah.
  - It is believed that they were originally the same body of literature before being broken into their current divisions.
  - We finished the book of Ezra at Thanksgiving (you can catch up or refresh your memory at the link on the TapTags)
  - And we’re kicking off 2026 with the book of Nehemiah.
- The book of Ezra was all about rebuilding the Temple
  - Beginning with the Decree of Cyrus in 538 BC, large groups of Jews returned to Israel from their exile in Persia.
  - Through fits and starts, with the encouragement of prophets like Haggai and Zechariah, the people were able to get the Temple rebuilt.
  - However, all that they had built was exposed and incredibly vulnerable to their enemies.
  - And as we will see in Nehemiah (and as we experienced in Ezra), there were plenty of opponents to this work.
- Nehemiah begins around 445 BC, so this work has been in progress for close to a century.

- A new king has taken the throne in Persia - King Artaxerxes.
- He sent Nehemiah, one of his most trusted officials, back to Jerusalem with another group of exiles, to work to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.
- Nehemiah is someone who isn't afraid to lead.
  - At the same time, he isn't a perfect leader.
  - However, one of the things that stands out about Nehemiah is that he is a leader who recognizes great value in prayer.
  - I think that considering his use of prayer is a great place for us to get started, as we begin this new book, and as we begin this new year.
- Nehemiah wastes no time getting us to the presenting problem.
  - He tells us who he is, he tells us when it is, he tells us where he is.
  - And then we are dropped into the action - a conversation between Nehemiah and Hanani
    - The text says that Hanani was Nehemiah's brother.
    - That very likely means that they were biological brothers.
    - We will meet Hanani again later in the book.
- It was very likely that he was part of a delegation that had returned to Persia for an audience with the Persian King.
  - They knew that Nehemiah was a high-ranking official, so if politics are in play here, then sending his brother would just about guarantee an audience.
  - When they meet, Nehemiah expressed his concern for his people, and the city.
  - And that is when Nehemiah learned about the state of the city.
  - It isn't good.
  - Maybe he had assumed things were better than they were.

- It wasn't like he could get on TikTok and see videos of the city.
- This might have been the first official word he's gotten.
- The news is devastating to Nehemiah.
  - The city and it's inhabitants are in trouble.
  - The place is a mess. Sure, there's a temple, but according to Hanani, it's basically sitting in the midst of ruins.
  - Everything around Jerusalem is basically like Nebuchadnezzar had left it 150 years ago.
  - When Nehemiah heard the news, his response is almost palpable.
- Verse 4 says it plainly, "As soon as I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven."
  - We don't know anything about Nehemiah yet - but we're immediately introduced to him as a man of deep devotion with a clear commitment to prayer.
  - However, his prayer life is so informative to us, even in our own lives today.
  - Over the next couple of weeks, we're going to take a closer look at what Nehemiah's prayer life can teach us about our own prayer life.
- The first thing Nehemiah teaches us about prayer is this:

**Our actions ought to be reactions to what God makes known to us in prayer.**

- We will see over the course of the next couple of months that Nehemiah is a man of action.
  - His may not be a perfect leader, but he is a decisive leader.
  - He'll make the hard decision.
  - He'll take the difficult step.
  - But he's not someone who makes decisions carelessly or impulsively.

- Before he acts, he prays.
- In the next chapter, he will go before the King and seek his blessing to go back to Jerusalem, but he's got much more important work to take care of
- Nehemiah knows there's a king with greater authority that he must speak with first.
- Right off the bat, I find myself convicted at Nehemiah's prayerful pattern.
  - I'd like to say that every action I take is soaked in prayer, but that isn't always the case.
  - Truthfully, how many of us follow the pattern of "take action and then pray that God will baptize the action that we've taken."
  - There have been too many times in my life where I have acted, or made a decision, and then got into the results of that decision and said, "God, I could sure use some help right now."
  - I have a feeling that I'm not alone in that realization.
- I don't ever get the impression that Nehemiah is a reluctant leader...he's clearly a man of action.
  - But he knows what has to come first.
  - For people who are flawed in this respect, this comes as a great reminder.
- It is highly unlikely that any of us are ever going to be faced with a problem on the scale of Nehemiah's.
  - We're just not in the same position.
  - Our decision-making rarely has the significance to shape the direction of a nation.
  - But we are regularly confronted with decisions that shape our communities, our churches, our schools - particularly our families.

- And it is just a good spiritual habit to begin to seek the Lord before we act.
- What does that look like for us?
  - It isn't "I've decided what I'm going to do, let me now pray and tell the Lord what I've decided."
    - If all you do is read Nehemiah's prayer through chapter 1 it would appear in the text of the prayer that Nehemiah's mind is made up as he prays.
    - But be careful you don't miss the first part.
    - We get only a snippet of Nehemiah's prayer - it takes just a minute or so to read.
    - But v. 4 is very clear - Nehemiah spent days toiling over this matter in prayer.
    - This leads me to believe that he's not sure what his responsibility is and he takes the time necessary to know what God wants him to do.
    - He expresses that in the part of his prayer that is recorded, but we don't have access to the work that went on behind the scenes.
  - When I lead mission teams, I always give them a short list of "Mission Trip Mantras."
    - They're just things that we tell ourselves during a trip that help us keep our mindset from getting sideways.
    - One of those mantras is this, "I left all my expectations at home."
      - If the bed is uncomfortable, you had no expectations of a comfortable bed.
      - If the food is not great, you had no expectations of great food.
    - I think that is also a good word for us when we come to the LORD like Nehemiah does here.

- I left all my expectations at home.
- I'm a blank page ready for the Lord to write his story on my life.
- I'm ready to act, or not to act.
- I'm ready to move, or not to move.
- In [Isaiah 6](#), when the prophet is commissioned by the Lord.
  - God looks at the prophet and says, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"
  - And Isaiah says, "Here I am! Send me."
  - He's got no idea where he's being sent to, but that's okay - he's willing to do what God says.
  - Isaiah doesn't say, "I'll go as long as it's comfortable, or as long as it's safe, or as long as I get two days off a week."
  - Isaiah says, "I'll go! (And we'll sort the details out later).
- And I believe that's the "unseen" part of Nehemiah's prayer...he's working out what the Lord wants from him and he records the resolution to his time of prayer and fasting.
- We need to be open to the leadership of the Spirit as we seek the Lord out in prayer.
- And we need to be willing to act in accordance with the Lord's guidance.
- It's not that I think God expects us to fast and pray over every decision that we make.
  - While Nehemiah opening prayer here is one of great labor, we will see that Nehemiah also utilizes "check-in prayer" throughout the book.
  - Times when he is in the middle of doing God's work, but he checks in periodically just to make sure he's on the right path.

- But I do think there's a second lesson that Nehemiah teaches us in prayer here and that is the role of persistence.

**Nehemiah models the New Testament principle of “pray without ceasing.”**  
**[\(Neh. 1:4, 1 Thess. 5:17\)](#)**

- Verse 4 is an incredibly convicting verse.
  - I think it is convicting for me because I see Nehemiah as one of the most ordinary leaders in the Bible.
  - He's not someone who gets to see miracles. He's not a prophet. He's not a mighty warrior.
  - It would not be wrong to say that Nehemiah is a very competent administrator, a very gifted project manager.
  - He's perhaps one of the most approachable characters in the Old Testament.
  - In spite of his “ordinary-ness,” he's not afraid to hit his knees.
- He's so burdened by the news of Jerusalem that he spends the next few days in prayer and fasting.
  - Of course, he's not engaging in a 24/7 prayer session, but it is very clear that he takes as much time as necessary to work through his next steps.
  - By incorporating fasting, he's adding a spiritual discipline to the conversation that is intended to speak, even when his mind is focused on other tasks.
  - Fasting isn't a magical activity - but is intended as a kind of sacrifice that focuses our attention on the LORD.
  - And fasting doesn't simply mean doing away with food for a set period of time.
    - We can fast from anything that helps us yield our attention to the LORD.

- In our generation, the most sacrificial fast might be to lay our phones down for a period of time - and every time the dopamine monster comes calling, we're reminded to come before the LORD.
- Jesus even pointed out in the Sermon on the Mount that fasting should be an important part of our Christian worship.
  - He said in [Matthew 6:16](#) - "When you fast..." not "If you fast..."
  - We clearly need a little work when it comes to fasting as a regular part of our Christian devotion.
  - When our most common fast is in preparation for a medical procedure, we've obviously gotten off-track in this area.
- But this passage in Nehemiah isn't intended to be prescriptive for us.
  - We don't need to take days of prayer and fasting for every action that we need to take.
  - It's easy to read passages like this and come to the conclusion that you're somehow less-than because you don't pray and fast like this.
  - But I do think there are some important takeaways:
- **First - when the phrase "Day and night" is used, it does signal continuity.**
  - Nehemiah refuses to treat prayer as a one-time request; instead, he embraces a rhythm of ongoing intercession.
  - I'm sure there was some repetition in this multi-day prayer retreat.
  - We don't pray naturally - even Jesus' disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray.
  - Since we don't do it naturally, we have to develop the habit and discipline.
  - That only happens with consistency, practice, and effort.
  - Mauro Prospero didn't just show up in the Sahara one day to try to run across it - that's unnatural.

- He put in lots of work on the front end to get ready for that effort.
- We will talk more about this next week, but I want to go ahead and point it out...
- **Secondly, Confession is woven into his persistence.**
  - Ongoing prayer is not only about asking but also about aligning our hearts with God’s holiness.
  - We have got the “intercession” part figured out.
  - We know how to ask God on our behalf and on behalf of others.
  - But confession of sin is an important part of our prayer life.
    - It isn’t that we have to remind God about our sin.
    - But confession helps maintain our humility.
    - Confession increases our gratitude.
    - When we reflect on how much we stray, we become even more indebted to God’s grace.
- **Thirdly, consistency in prayer reminds us that God is attentive—and trains us to live as though that’s true..**
  - It is a reminder that we believe God hears every repeated cry.
  - It is a reminder of our dependence - that we cannot fix our problems in our own strength.
- The challenge for us is not to develop the habit of prayer and fasting to make every decision - that’s not the point here, but I do think it is a good reminder for us:
  - To schedule unhurried time with the Lord.
    - And treat those times as non-negotiable.
    - If you’ve got a doctor’s appointment, you show up.

- If you know you're going to have to wait for 45 minutes in the waiting room, you still show up on time.
- If you've got tickets to a movie, you show up.
- If you know there are 30 minutes of ads and trailers, you still show up at showtime.
- We should treat time with the LORD with even greater commitment.
- Keep a running list of burdens and revisit them until God answers or redirects.
  - If you're a writer, keep a journal of what the LORD has laid on your heart.
  - Who is it that you're praying for? Keep track of how the LORD is working in their lives.
- Don't ignore confession.
  - Let the Spirit expose hidden sin.
  - Give the Spirit space to show you where you're harboring things.
- Don't be afraid of repetition.
  - Every repetition enlarges faith and sharpens focus on God's glory

## **Conclusion**

- Mauro Prosperi didn't survive the Sahara because the desert became easier.
  - The sun didn't soften.
  - The dunes didn't part.
  - The landscape never changed.
- What changed was his refusal to abandon the things that kept him alive.
  - He drank carefully.
  - He moved wisely.

- He rested intentionally.
- And day after day, with no guarantee of rescue, he kept doing the same life-preserving things again and again.
- That's persistence.
- Nehemiah shows us the same truth, just in a different landscape.
  - Jerusalem doesn't suddenly improve while he's praying.
  - The walls don't rebuild themselves overnight.
  - The political situation doesn't magically resolve.
- But Nehemiah stays before God.
  - Day after day, night after night.
  - Fasting, confessing, seeking...
  - With a heart that refused to rush past grief or shortcut dependence.
  - Nehemiah didn't pray persistently because prayer fixes everything immediately.
  - He prayed persistently because prayer is what keeps him spiritually alive while he waits for God to act.
- And that's the invitation for us.
  - Some of you are walking through a season where the way forward is unclear.
    - You've prayed before, but nothing seems to have changed.
    - The temptation is to assume prayer isn't working and quietly move on.
- But Scripture invites us to a better instinct.
  - When clarity is gone, don't abandon prayer.
  - When answers delay, don't shorten your time with God.

- When progress feels invisible, return again to the presence of the One who sustains you.
- Persistence in prayer isn't about wearing God down.
  - It's about letting God shape you while you wait.
  - So don't quit praying because the desert still looks like a desert.
  - Stay with the practices that keep you alive.
- And trust that, in God's time, the way forward will become clear.