

Unwavering Resolve

A Holy Burden

Nehemiah 1

May 17, 2026

Introduction

This weekend, I've been in Atlanta with Abby, Luke, my dad and Abby Jane (tell the story of IFLY).

Body

God's Sovereignty

Unwavering resolve for God and His mission is rooted in a firm grasp of God's sovereignty over all of history.

Look at Nehemiah 1:1-3. ***(SLIDES)***

During the month of Chislev in the twentieth year, when I was in the fortress city of Susa, 2 Hanani, one of my brothers, arrived with men from Judah, and I questioned them about Jerusalem and the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile.

3 They said to me, "The remnant in the province, who survived the exile, are in great trouble and disgrace. Jerusalem's wall has been broken down, and its gates have been burned."

It's the phrase "survived the exile" that's critical to our understanding of the text and therefore what it means for our lives.

Nehemiah was standing in the long shadow of 150 years of divine discipline and restoration. The Babylonian Empire, under Nebuchadnezzar, had conquered Jerusalem in 586 BC, destroyed the temple, and carried God's people into exile. To the human eye, it looked like Israel's story was over ... that the promises made to Abraham and David had been erased by human failure and foreign power.

But behind those events stood a sovereign God who had foretold this through the prophets, not as a sign that He'd abandoned His people, but that He was faithfully keeping His word. God was writing redemptive history even in Babylon's rise and Israel's decline.

Then, right on schedule, Babylon fell and Persia rose. And the Persians did what no ancient superpower ever did—they sent conquered peoples home. Usually, conquered people groups were exiled ... dispersed amidst other people groups that had been conquered so that they would lose their national identity.

But Persia did not do this. Why? Because God “stirred the heart” of King Cyrus to do exactly what He had promised through Isaiah 150 years earlier (Isa. 44:28 – 45:1).

That’s the backdrop of Nehemiah’s story: the Lord of heaven directing global empires like chess pieces to fulfill His covenant purposes. Babylon didn’t win because it was powerful; Persia didn’t rise because it was clever. These nations, like all nations, were instruments in the hands of the God who never stops steering history toward His mission. God is unwavering in His resolve to guide all of history.

Application

This creates within all of us a deep faith and trust in Him. As we’ll see in our text today, Nehemiah wasn’t paralyzed by news of the ruins or his distance from Jerusalem. Heartbroken? Yes. Burdened? Yes. Panicked? No. He knew that the same sovereign hand that guided empires was still on the throne.

(SLIDE) When we really believe that God reigns over every turn in the story (personal, cultural, or global), we stop living reactively and start living purposefully. If He rules over nations, He can certainly rule over your Monday morning, your family situation, your future. Instead of reacting to headlines or personal crises with fear, we can pause and remind ourselves: “God rules over kings and kingdoms; He’s writing the story.”

God’s Covenant

The second thing we see in this passage is that ***unwavering resolve for God and His mission is rooted in a firm grasp of God’s covenant love for His people.***

Look at vv. 4-6. ***(SLIDE)***

4 When I heard these words, I sat down and wept. I mourned for a number of days, fasting and praying before the God of the heavens. 5 I said, “LORD, the God of the heavens, the great and awe-inspiring God who keeps his gracious covenant with those who love him and keep his commands ...”

Now, I’ll come back to verse 4 soon enough, but for now, focus on v. 5 with me.

If God’s ***sovereignty*** shows us that nothing is outside His control, His ***covenant love*** reminds us that nothing is outside His concern. Nehemiah operates under the assumption not only that God is sovereign, but that He is also faithful. If he were worshiping with us last week, Nehemiah

would have smiled as we sang “Great is Thy Faithfulness.” *Thou changest not; Thy compassions they fail not.*

And on the basis of God’s covenantal love, Nehemiah prays. He seeks God because He knows God has promised to love him and his people. And you can tell that it’s covenantal love driving this prayer if you take a moment to analyze the language.

As we’ve seen, he says in verse 5 that God is the ***God who keeps his gracious covenant with those who love him and keep his commands.***

But in verses 7-10, Nehemiah effectively quotes the covenant back to God. ***(SLIDES)***

7 We have acted corruptly toward you and have not kept the commands, statutes, and ordinances you gave your servant Moses. 8 Please remember what you commanded your servant Moses: “If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples.

9 But if you return to me and carefully observe my commands, even though your exiles were banished to the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place where I chose to have my name dwell.”

10 They are your servants and your people. You redeemed them by your great power and strong hand.

Notice that he isn’t manipulating God; he’s aligning his heart with God’s revealed covenant purposes. Nehemiah knows that God’s love isn’t sentimental but steadfast. God’s love is anchored in His promises, expressed through His discipline, and proven in His mercy.

That covenant love gives Nehemiah both humility and hope. He can confess “we have sinned” honestly because he knows he’s praying to a God whose mercy is deeper than Israel’s failure. He doesn’t excuse the sin of his people; he owns it as one who belongs to them. And yet, he prays with courageous expectation that forgiveness and restoration are still possible.

Application

(SLIDE) The paradox of covenant love is that it exposes sin but never abandons sinners. It disciplines, but it never destroys. When we grasp that we are loved with a love that will not let us go, our lives are radically changed.

- We can face our shortcomings, confess what’s broken, and still believe God can rebuild.
- We can forgive other people quickly and show mercy to those who hurt us.
- We can stay committed to people and churches when things get messy, because covenant love means long-term faithfulness. Long-suffering, if you will.

God's Glory

When you really grasp God's covenant love, it changes how you see everything, including His mission. Which leads me to my third thing I want you to see in this text.

Unwavering resolve for God and His mission is rooted in a desire for God to receive the honor and glory He alone is due.

Look at v. 11a with me.

(SLIDE) Please, Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant and to that of your servants who delight to revere your name.

Covenant love doesn't just comfort; ***it compels***. Once Nehemiah remembers who God is and how steadfast His love has been, his heart lifts beyond the ruins to the reputation of God's name. Nehemiah knows that Jerusalem's desolation isn't just a national problem; it's a theological one. The city that was meant to display the presence and praise of Yahweh now lies in ruins, giving the surrounding nations reason to mock Israel's God.

So Nehemiah's desire to rebuild isn't driven by nostalgia or nationalism—it's rooted in a holy burden: ***God's reputation deserves to be restored.***

Application

(SLIDE) Covenant love always leads to a longing for glory. When you know you're loved securely, you stop living to prove yourself and start living to praise Him.

- We stop asking "How can I build my brand?" and start asking, "How can I help build God's kingdom?"
- We work to align our goals with God's glory, not our own.
- We give generously of our time, money, and effort to spotlight the glory of God.

God's Story

Which leads me to the last thing I want you to see in our passage today.

Unwavering resolve for God and His mission humbles us and convicts us to be a part of something that's bigger than ourselves.

Look at all of v. 11 with me.

"Please, Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant and to that of your servants who delight to revere your name. Give your servant success today, and grant him compassion in the presence of this man." At the time, I was the king's cupbearer.

The grandeur of God's glory humbled Nehemiah. He knew that rebuilding the wall would take courage and leadership, but he understood that the story wasn't about him at all. He'd probably be mortified that his memoir is called "Nehemiah" in your Bible because he knew that his greatness lied in his willingness to be small in God's hands.

He holds one of the most privileged and trusted positions in the Persian court, yet he sees himself primarily as a servant of God, called to serve a broken people. That's a radical shift of identity. Nehemiah knows that obedience will cost him comfort, security, and reputation. Still, he's willing to lay those aside because he recognizes that God's story is bigger than his position.

Application

That's what true humility looks like. It is self-forgetfulness.

(SLIDE) Tim Keller put it like this in his little book, "The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness." He wrote, "The essence of humility is not thinking more of myself or thinking less of myself, it is thinking of myself less."

Humility of this sort leads us to marvel that God would in any way choose to involve us in something so grand. Is that your attitude toward the Christian life? Is that your attitude toward the church and its mission? Are you marveling at the fact God wants you to be a part of what He is doing? If not, perhaps there is some degree of pride you need to confess and repent from.

But this kind of humility does even more in and through us. ***(SLIDES)***

- **It compels us to hold plans loosely.** It makes us willing to let God redirect or reshape our ambitions for His purposes.
- **It compels us to step out of our comfort zones.** Nehemiah left the palace for rubble. Faithful obedience often means trading convenience for calling, and humility is required for us to step into those opportunities.
- **It keeps us teachable.** Humility keeps a learner's posture before God and others, open to correction and growth.

Conclusion/Application

(TITLE SLIDE)

Nehemiah's story has pointed us to God's sovereignty, God's covenant, God's glory, and God's story. And in these ways, Nehemiah's story points us forward to Jesus Christ, who perfectly embodied every truth we see in this chapter.

Nehemiah trusted that God ruled empires and kings. In Christ, we see that sovereignty on display. God orchestrated every moment of history to bring His Son into the world "in the fullness of time." The cross was not an accident of politics but the plan of a sovereign God who

uses all things for redemption. Our confidence rests in that same rule of Christ over every detail of our lives.

Nehemiah prayed according to God's covenant promises. Jesus is the fulfillment of those promises. In His life and death, He became the mediator of a new covenant, sealed by His own blood. The steadfast love Nehemiah celebrated has now taken flesh and dwelt among us. Because of Christ, we know that God's covenant love will never fail His people again.

Nehemiah longed for God's name to be honored once more in Jerusalem. Jesus came to reveal the full glory of God—"the radiance of His glory and the exact imprint of His nature." At the cross and in the resurrection, the glory of God was displayed in grace and truth. Our mission now mirrors Nehemiah's desire, but with a new center: we live to make much of Christ, the One who has revealed the glory of the Father.

Nehemiah left privilege behind to serve God's people. Jesus left the throne of heaven and took the form of a servant, humbling Himself to the point of death on a cross. Through Him, we are invited into something far bigger than ourselves; namely, the ongoing mission of restoring broken lives through the gospel. True humility now means joining the work that He began, empowered by His Spirit.

When we grasp these truths together, the story of Nehemiah becomes a window into the story of redemption. The God who stirred one man's heart to rebuild walls is the same God who sent His Son to rebuild our hearts. The unwavering resolve that Nehemiah modeled is fulfilled and empowered in Jesus Christ, so that the people of God might live with that same resolve today: rooted in His sovereignty, held by His covenant love, compelled by His glory, and humbled by His grace.