

“Opposition, Part 2”
Nehemiah 6:1-19
Nehemiah: Rebuilding a City & People for God
Mercy Hill Church | June 4, 2023

Now when Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies heard that I had built the wall and that there was no breach left in it (although up to that time I had not set up the doors in the gates), ²Sanballat and Geshem sent to me, saying, “Come and let us meet together at Hakkephirim in the plain of Ono.” But they intended to do me harm. ³And I sent messengers to them, saying, “I am doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you?” ⁴And they sent to me four times in this way, and I answered them in the same manner. ⁵In the same way Sanballat for the fifth time sent his servant to me with an open letter in his hand. ⁶In it was written, “It is reported among the nations, and Geshem also says it, that you and the Jews intend to rebel; that is why you are building the wall. And according to these reports you wish to become their king. ⁷And you have also set up prophets to proclaim concerning you in Jerusalem, ‘There is a king in Judah.’ And now the king will hear of these reports. So now come and let us take counsel together.” ⁸Then I sent to him, saying, “No such things as you say have been done, for you are inventing them out of your own mind.” ⁹For they all wanted to frighten us, thinking, “Their hands will drop from the work, and it will not be done.” But now, O God, strengthen my hands. ¹⁰Now when I went into the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, son of Mehetabel, who was confined to his home, he said, “Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple. Let us close the doors of the temple, for they are coming to kill you. They are coming to kill you by night.” ¹¹But I said, “Should such a man as I run away? And what man such as I could go into the temple and live? I will not go in.” ¹²And I understood and saw that God had not sent him, but he had pronounced the prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. ¹³For this purpose he was hired, that I should be afraid and act in this way and sin, and so they could give me a bad name in order to taunt me. ¹⁴Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God, according to these things that they did, and also the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who wanted to make me afraid. ¹⁵So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. ¹⁶And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem, for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God. ¹⁷Moreover, in those days the nobles of Judah sent many letters to Tobiah, and Tobiah's letters came to them. ¹⁸For many in Judah were bound by oath to him, because he was the son-in-law of Shecaniah the son of Arah: and his son Jehohanan had taken the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah as his wife. ¹⁹Also they spoke of his good deeds in my presence and reported my words to him. And Tobiah sent letters to make me afraid.

Big Idea: We need to be vigilant of the different ways Satan, sin and the world tempts and deceives us. We can persevere through depending on God in prayer, trusting in God's Word, and keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus – for His glory!

Summary of Nehemiah chapters 1-5:

- Nehemiah 1: “Conviction” – Nehemiah’s conviction for God’s purposes leads him to pray in response to the dire circumstance of God’s city (Jerusalem) and God’s people even though Nehemiah is nearly a thousand miles away from Jerusalem in Susa.
- Nehemiah 2:1-8: “Mission” – Nehemiah’s conviction becomes a clear mission through prayer, planning, and steps of faith under God’s sovereignty while serving as the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes of Persia.
- Nehemiah 2:9-20: “Preparation” – Before actual rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, Nehemiah personally inspects and evaluates the task at hand. Subsequently, Nehemiah calls God’s people to rebuild the walls together for God’s glory – despite rising opposition from Sanballat and others.
- Nehemiah 3: “Construction” – Presented is the list of names of all who helped rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Beyond this list of names, we see the unity and diversity of God’s people, the availability and adaptability of God’s people, and the heart and humility of God’s people.
- Nehemiah 4: “Opposition” – As Nehemiah and the people of God rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, they face several waves of opposition – a wave of verbal opposition and a wave of physical opposition. This leads to some internal opposition as some doubt and dissension rises among the people. Nehemiah and the people are ultimately able to persevere and withstand the opposition by turning to the Lord in prayer, responding in action and supporting one another.

- Nehemiah 5: “Division” – Nehemiah not only faces external opposition but also internal division as it comes to his attention some of the injustices committed by his own people against his own people. Instead of compromising or ignoring, Nehemiah confronts the people which leads to repentance. In addition, we see Nehemiah’s integrity as a leader in self-sacrifice and generosity for others in light of the some of the injustices which have been committed.

Theme: Rebuilding a City & People for God

- Chapters 1-7 Rebuilding the Walls of Jerusalem
- Chapters 8-13 Rebuilding (Reforming) God’s People

Opposition, Part 2

- As the walls are near completion, Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem (“STG”) launch their final attempts at Nehemiah to prevent the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem.

Change of Tactics

- Here in Nehemiah 6, Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem switch strategies – different to what they did previously in Nehemiah 4.
- 1) **Focus on the Individual** (Nehemiah in vv.2, 6-7, 10) -- instead trying to stop all the people who are rebuilding the walls (cf. Nehemiah 4: 1, 8; 2:19), It’s easier to take down one person vs. a whole group of people. Often times leaders are strategic prime targets to take down an organization!
- 2) **Opposition through Deception**. Instead of direct attacks on Nehemiah and the people of God (e.g. ridicule, mockery and physical threats in Nehemiah 4:1-5, 7-8), Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem resort to covert tactics.
 - The way of Satan, sin and the world is one of deception (and lies). Satan is the deceiver (cf. Genesis 3:1-6, Matthew 4:1-11, John 8:44). At the root of every temptation is a lie or, “Every sin hides a lie.”
 - C.S. Lewis writes, “Readers are advised to remember that the devil is a liar” in his introduction to *Screwtape Letters*, a fictional novel about Screwtape and his nephew Wormwood, both demons, on how to tempt and cause a British man, “the Patient,” to fall into sin. Quote: “It does not matter how small the sins are provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the Light and out into the Nothing. Murder is no better than cards if cards can do the trick. Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one--the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.”

3 Attempts Against Nehemiah (vv.1-14)

1. Distraction (vv.1-4)

- Sanballat and Geshem call for a meeting with Nehemiah. Purpose of the meeting is unclear, but Nehemiah had obligations as a governor to meet with other leaders (like Sanballat).
 - The location (Hakkephirim in the plain of Ono) is most likely about a day’s journey northwest of Jerusalem – most likely within the borders of Israel, but halfway between Jerusalem and Samaria (where Sanballat was a leader).
- Sanballat’s intention is to injure (or even assassinate) Nehemiah, but even if not able to, he could and was able to distract and pull Nehemiah from the work at hand with these constant requests and letters.
- In the New Testament, we see in Jesus’ life and ministry how often He was confronted with things which might pull him away from His mission (cf. Mark 1:32-39, 8:31-33)

2. Accusation (vv.5-9)

- Seeing that these initial letters and requests to meet didn't work, Sanballat sends an open letter to Nehemiah. An open letter meant that anyone who handled or saw the letter could read it – and the content of the letter would spread quickly (re: gossip)
 - Traditionally, letters would be written on a scroll made out of papyrus or leather, rolled up and sealed (in a tube or tied by a string) with an official seal.
 - The open letter accuses Nehemiah of rebellion and treason – that the rebuilding of the wall was part of Nehemiah's master plan to become king!
 - The consequence could be death – but at the minimum tarnished Nehemiah's reputation as a leader amongst his people...or possibly would finally get Nehemiah to finally meet up with Sanballat.
- Throughout Jesus' life and ministry, he was repeatedly falsely accused by the scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees (the religious leaders at the time) of blasphemy, heresy or even being Satan or demonic Himself! (cf. Mark 2:6-7, 15-16, 3:1-6, 11-30; 1:9-10).
 - In fact, Satan is referred to as the accuser (cf. Revelation 12:10, Romans 8:33-34)

3. Manipulation (vv.10-14, 17-19)

- While the specific details and context of Shemaiah being confined to his home are unclear, what is clear is how Tobiah and Sanballat have resorted to intimidation (v.10), corruption (v.13) and manipulation.
 - The plan was to have Shemaiah speak on behalf of God to Nehemiah to convince him to run and hide in the temple – ultimately to discredit Nehemiah as a leader and as a faithful believer since only the priests could enter the temple (cf. Numbers 18:7).
- We see in the Old Testament warnings about false prophets (cf. Jeremiah 14:14) and also in the New Testament (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:12-15). We also see in the life and ministry of Jesus how frequently the Pharisees would try to manipulate, trap and ultimately kill Jesus (cf. Mark 11:27-33, 12:13-17, 12:18-27, 12:28-34, 14:1-2)

Nehemiah's Response

- Nehemiah Responds w/ **Discernment & Focus** (vv.2-5, 12-13)
 - **Discernment** (v.2 – “they intended to do me harm, v.9 – “For they all wanted to frighten us...”, v.12 – “And I understood and saw that God had not sent him...”)
 - Paul David Tripp's *Lead: 12 Gospel Principles for Leadership in the Church*
 - “Principle 6: War – It is essential to understand that leadership in any gospel ministry is spiritual warfare: Each leader must humbly accept and be growingly aware of his susceptibilities...We must examine and defend ourselves against Satan's devices”
 - **Focus:** Nehemiah was clear in his conviction & mission (vv.3-4)
 - Throughout all the obstacles and opposition Nehemiah faced in rebuilding the walls, his conviction (Nehemiah 1) and mission (Nehemiah 2) remained clear – he knew his “why” (God had called him, the people of God, God's glory and honor) and his “what” (rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem)
 - While Nehemiah denies the false accusations (v.8), he doesn't spend a lot of energy and time defending himself.
 - Quotes from Peter Greer's *Mission Drift: The Unspoken Crisis Facing Leaders, Charities and Churches*:

- “Without careful attention, faith-based organizations will inevitably drift from their founding mission.”
- “In its simplest form, Mission True organizations know why they exist and protect their core at all costs. They remain faithful to what they believe God has entrusted them to do. They define what is immutable: their values and purposes, their DNA, their heart and soul.”
- Example of Harvard University
- What is the mission of the church?
 - Great Commandment, Great Commission (Matthew 22:36-40, 28:18-20): Love God, Love Others – Make Disciples
 - MHC Mission Statement: “Mercy Hill Church exists to help restore us to God, neighbor, and city through the good news of Jesus Christ.” Faith, Community, Mission
- Not only did Nehemiah know the “why” and “what,” he also clearly knew “who.” (vv.8, 11)
 - Nehemiah knew *who he was* (a servant of the Lord, a cupbearer, not a king or a priest) and he knew *who God is* (i.e. sovereign, holy, worthy of worship and praise, just and merciful, etc.)
- Ultimately, Nehemiah responds in faith instead of fear (v.9, 13, 14 19)...but how?
- Because Nehemiah perseveres through **Prayer and God’s Word**
 - **Prayer:** Throughout the book of Nehemiah, we see Nehemiah’s instinctive and continual response of turning to God in prayer (Nehemiah 1:4, 2:4, 4:4, 5:6, 5:19)
 - Turns to the Lord for strength and courage (v.9b)
 - Turns to the Lord for justice (v.14) in the face of corruption and manipulation
 - Quote from Timothy Keller, Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God: “To pray is to accept that we are, and always will be, wholly dependent on God for everything...Prayer turns theology into experience...To fail to pray, then, is not to merely break some religious rule—it is a failure to treat God as God”
 - **God’s Word** (v.11)
 - Nehemiah knows the Word of God – God’s Word is on his mind and in his heart.
 - And in particular, knows what God’s Word says about who may and may not enter the Temple (cf. Numbers 18:7)
 - Nehemiah is not afraid to lose his life – “his greater concern is not his personal safety but the sanctity of God’s sacred space...he would rather die than desecrate the temple!”

Completion of the Wall (vv.15-16)

- And ultimately as Nehemiah survives all these waves of opposition, the walls of Jerusalem are finally finished on the month Elul (6th month of the Jewish year, fall), approximately 52 days.
- **Work of God to the Glory of God by All Nations**
 - What’s amazing is the response of the enemies of Nehemiah and the people of God – the very people who were opposing the rebuilding of the walls clearly saw that it was a work of God. They were in awe and acknowledged the power of God! (cf. Matthew 27:54)
 - “They fell greatly in their own esteem” => “Fell much in their own eyes”
 - What’s also amazing is that these very people (of different cultures/ethnicity) who were united together against Nehemiah and the purposes of God were now united in having to

acknowledge the sovereignty of God! (cf. Revelation 7:8) – the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, “a light to the nations” (cf. Isaiah 49:6)

Big Idea: We need to be vigilant of the different ways Satan, sin and the world tempts and deceives us. We can persevere through depending on God in prayer, trusting in God’s Word, and keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus – for His glory!

Reflection Questions

- In what ways do you find yourself distracted these days? What are the things which tend to distract you from what you need to focus on -- esp. when it comes to your faith?
- Have you ever been falsely accused of something? How did you feel -- and how did you respond? Are there areas of your life where you find yourself being "falsely accused" by Satan or sin -- even though you have already repented and been forgiven by Jesus?
- In the face of difficulties, are you more (or less) tempted to sin? Why? Are you more susceptible to temptation and sin when things are going well or not?
- When have you experienced the power of prayer and God's Word to help you in your struggle against difficulties, sin & temptation? In what ways can you recenter yourself in prayer and the Word of God?
- How might the difficulties or temptations you are currently facing lead to the glory of God by those around you?
- How does this passage point you to Jesus and the gospel message?