

Defeating Distractions

NEHEMIAH 6

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In just a few moments, I would invite you to look with me at the building of a wall in the book of Nehemiah - Nehemiah 6 (p. 773). Most of us here this morning obviously understand the value of having walls. Some of us have had the experience of building walls or at least repairing various walls. Years ago, we remodeled a bathroom at our very first house down in Janesville, and when I added a shower to that room, I put a note inside the wall before I sealed it up, and in that note, I said, "If you are reading this, then I sincerely apologize, because something has obviously gone terribly wrong." And then I signed it and dated it. I hope, though, that nobody ever finds that note. Walls, though, are very important. We think about the Great Wall of China, built to keep invaders out. We think about the Berlin Wall, built to keep people in. A number of years ago, we were able to see a section of that wall at the Air Force Museum over in Dayton, Ohio. We think about one of the most moving memorials in Washington, DC, built in the shape of a wall. As far as borders go, we think of the various fences and walls that have been built along our southern border, built in an attempt to help stem the tide of illegal immigration. Of course, those walls are not always as effective as they need to be.

This morning, though, we are talking about the wall around the city of Jerusalem. The account in Nehemiah 6 takes place in 444 BC. Because of their sin, God's people had been taken away into Babylonian Captivity more than a hundred years earlier. Under King Nebuchadnezzar, the city of Jerusalem was destroyed, the walls were torn down, and nearly all of the people were taken back to Babylon as slaves. After about 70 years, though the people started going back. At some point in there, the Babylonians were conquered by the Persians. Nehemiah stayed behind and served as the cupbearer for Artaxerxes, the king of Persia. The cupbearer was basically the man in charge of tasting the food to make sure it wasn't poisoned. So if we can imagine this, this is Nehemiah's job: His job was to stay right by the king at all times – at home, on the road, at fancy banquets, wherever the king went, Nehemiah would also go, and Nehemiah's job was to take a small sample of everything the king was about to eat. They would wait a little while, and if Nehemiah didn't get sick and die, the king would go ahead and eat. As you can imagine, Nehemiah developed quite a relationship with King Artaxerxes. They spent a lot of time together. There was a lot of trust there. So, over time, as more and more of the Jewish people started making that trip back home, Nehemiah kept getting reports concerning how things were going. The people were coming back, but the city of Jerusalem was basically in shambles. Things were perhaps very slowly coming together, but in those reports, Nehemiah could see a huge problem, and the problem is: Nobody had yet rebuilt the wall around the city of Jerusalem. So, the city was wide open. There were many kings and clans in the area who were terrified that the Jews might get their act together. So the

situation was tense, to say the least. To leave the city unprotected was asking for trouble, asking for disaster. Nehemiah, then, as a slave, asked the king for some time off. It is not often that a slave will ask for time off, but Nehemiah does. And thankfully, the king goes a step further. Not only does he give Nehemiah some time away, but he also appoints him governor of Jerusalem and sends him on his way with everything he needs, but there is one condition, and that is: Nehemiah has to come back to Persia when he is done.

He leaves for Jerusalem, then, with one mission, and the mission is: While I am there, we must complete the wall. The economy needs help, we need to train leaders, we need to set things in order, but our number one mission absolutely positively has to be the rebuilding of the defensive wall around the city. The book of Nehemiah, therefore, is a record of this wall being repaired.

As I mentioned earlier, though, a lot of the locals are dead-set against the wall. They do not want to see Jerusalem ever regain any sense of power. They don't want to lose any of their own power. They like that wall lying there in ruins. And the leader of the opposition is a man by the name of Sanballat. Sanballat did everything in his power to keep that wall from being rebuilt. Sanballat sent spies, he orchestrated rumors, he had people working behind the scenes, he even coordinated an armed attack. And so at one point, the builders had to work with a sword in one hand and a trowel in the other. And yet in spite of the opposition, the wall continued to come together. And now, here in Nehemiah 6, the wall itself is basically done, except for the gates. And that is where we pick up with the final plot in Nehemiah 6. In Nehemiah 6, we find that Sanballat coordinates a series of distractions – not outright attacks, but distractions.

Do we ever get distracted today? Do we ever get pulled away from our main mission in life by things that are not truly important? I wonder: What would it take for you to be distracted right now? What if your stomach starts growling? What if a baby started screaming at the top of his or her lungs? What if an ambulance comes roaring down Acewood Boulevard? Sometimes we can be distracted by something as simple as the temperature here in this room. At 73, everybody's too cold. At 74 everybody's too hot. Many things have the power to pull our attention away from what is truly important. And that is the tactic that Sanballat tries next. If you will, please look with me at Nehemiah 6,

¹ Now when it was reported to Sanballat, Tobiah, to Geshem the Arab and to the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall, and that no breach remained in it, although at that time I had not set up the doors in the gates, ² then Sanballat and Geshem sent a message to me, saying, "Come, let us meet together at Chephirim in the plain of Ono." But they were planning to harm me. ³ So 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?" ⁴ They sent messages to me four times in this manner, and I answered them in the same way.

⁵ Then Sanballat sent his servant to me in the same manner a fifth time with an open letter in his hand. ⁶ In it was written, "It is reported among the nations, and Gashmu says, that you and the Jews are planning to rebel; therefore you are rebuilding the wall. And you are to be their king, according to these reports. ⁷ You have also appointed prophets to proclaim in Jerusalem concerning you, 'A king is in Judah!' And now it will be reported to the king according to these reports. So come now, let us take counsel together." ⁸ Then I sent a message to him saying, "Such things as you are saying have not been done, but you are inventing them in your own mind." ⁹ For all of them were trying to frighten us, thinking, "They will become discouraged with the work and it will not be done." But now, O God, strengthen my hands.

¹⁰ *When I entered the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, son of Mehetabel, who was confined at home, he said, "Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and let us close the doors of the temple, for they are coming to kill you, and they are coming to kill you at night."* ¹¹ *But I said, "Should a man like me flee? And could one such as I go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in."* ¹² *Then I perceived that surely God had not sent him, but he uttered his prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him.* ¹³ *He was hired for this reason, that I might become frightened and act accordingly and sin, so that they might have an evil report in order that they could reproach me.* ¹⁴ *Remember, O my God, Tobiah and Sanballat according to these works of theirs, and also Noadiah the prophetess and the rest of the prophets who were trying to frighten me.*

¹⁵ *So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of the month Elul, in fifty-two days.* ¹⁶ *When all our enemies heard of it, and all the nations surrounding us saw it, they lost their confidence; for they recognized that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.* ¹⁷ *Also in those days many letters went from the nobles of Judah to Tobiah, and Tobiah's letters came to them.* ¹⁸ *For 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 married the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah.* ¹⁹ *Moreover, they were speaking about his good deeds in my presence and reported my words to him. Then Tobiah sent letters to frighten me.*

As we let this chapter sink in a little bit and as we apply it to our situation today, I want us to think about those distractions that were aimed at throwing Nehemiah off course, I want us to think about how Nehemiah dealt with each of those distractions, and then at the end I want us to think about what all of this really means for us today.

- I. **First of all, though, notice please what happens in the first few verses as this Sanballat guy tries to get Nehemiah to TALK instead of DO.**

There has always been a great danger in TALKING instead of DOING, and that is the temptation here in verse 2. The messenger comes in and says, ***"Come, let us meet together...in the plain of Ono."*** The wall is almost done, "Why don't we sit down and talk about this? Why don't you get away from this project for a little bit? Why don't you come up here, and let us meet on neutral ground, and let us have a conference? Let us negotiate. Let us talk about this wall you're building." Notice, though: For some reason, Nehemiah sees a plot here. The plains of Ono are about 20 miles north of Jerusalem. Nehemiah decides that this is only a trick, and so he does not stop working on the wall. Instead (in verse 3), Nehemiah sends messengers, ***"I am doing a great work and I cannot come down."*** We have the idea, then, that Nehemiah was interrupted, and yet he refused to get distracted.

For just a moment, let's think about some of the good things we do today. We may not be building a wall like Nehemiah was, but all of us (hopefully) are doing God's work. Bringing up Christian children is God's work. Maintaining a healthy marriage is God's work. Teaching a Bible class is God's work. Explaining the plan of salvation to a friend is God's work. Maintaining this building as a decent and comfortable place to worship is God's work. Whatever our mission on God's behalf might be, I think all of us would agree that other things have a way of pulling us away from that primary mission. Often, people will pull us aside with some kind of distraction, and the temptation is to TALK instead of DO. Nehemiah, though, reminds us to stay focused.

I think of the trouble I had as a kid when it came to cleaning my room. You know how easy it is to get distracted! My dad, though, gave me some advice that I still use when cleaning a room today. He said: You pick any spot in the room and move to the right; think of the floor as the face of a clock; and as you move to the right, take one thing at a time and deal with it – put it where it goes, throw it away, whatever; but do not deviate from the plan. And I still think about that every time I clean a room, even today. Sometimes we need the same focus when doing God’s work. We need the focus of Nehemiah. We are not to get pulled aside to talk or negotiate, but we are dig in and stick with it, ignoring all of the many distractions along the way. As was read to us earlier from Luke 9:62, “No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.”

II. As we go back to our text and as we look at verses 5-9, we see Sanballat using a second strategy in his effort to pull Nehemiah away from the wall, and that is: Sanballat resorts to SLANDER, he resorts to the spreading of a FALSE RUMOR, and it comes in the form of an “OPEN LETTER.”

Sanballat, then, does not give up, but he keeps on sending messages. In verse 4, we find he tries the “talking but not doing” strategy four times before moving on to what is basically a veiled threat down in verse 5. In verse 5, Sanballat sends a servant a fifth time **“with an open letter in his hand.”** Normally, of course, letters are sealed. Normally, letters are intended to communicate something one-on-one. This letter, though, is open. This letter was meant to be public. This was almost like a letter to the editor in the local paper. It was meant to be widely read. And the letter starts by saying, **“It is reported among the nations, and Gashmu says....”** In other words, the open letter was not really aimed at Nehemiah, but the letter was intended to spread a rumor. From time to time even today, somebody will come up to me with a problem, and they will start the conversation by saying, “Everybody says this,” or “People are saying this or that,” and when we investigate a little bit, we find that “everybody” is actually that person and his or her mother! “Everybody” is one or two people! When they want to spread a rumor, though, when somebody wants to take a cheap shot, nobody wants to take personal responsibility, and so they will talk about how “everybody” is saying this or that. And that seems to be what we have here in verse 6. Some guy named Gashmu was saying that Nehemiah was planning some kind of a rebellion. And the purpose of the letter was not to talk Nehemiah out of rebelling – Nehemiah was not rebelling! Instead, the purpose of the open letter was to spread the rumor, to spread this false information.

Now at this point, we might be tempted to come to our own defense. We might be tempted to try to trace down the source of this thing and maybe take some kind of revenge. But notice what Governor Nehemiah does. He writes a very short note in return (in verse 8), **“Such things as you are saying have not been done, but you are inventing them in your own mind.”** And then notice what he does next. He goes to God in prayer (at the end of verse 9), **“O God, strengthen my hands,”** and then he gets back to work on the wall. So once again, he refuses to get distracted. He refuses to get pulled off of his main mission, which was completing the wall and its gates. He does not let this unjust criticism slow him down.

We think of what President Lincoln once said. Somebody questioned him about all of the things that were being said against him concerning the war effort, and the question was, “Mr. President, aren’t you going to do something? Aren’t you going to answer all of these allegations?” And this is his response, “If I were to try to read, much less answer, all the attacks made on me, this shop might as well be closed for any other business. I do the very best I know how – the very best I can; and I mean to keep doing so until the end. If the end brings me out all right, what’s said against me won’t amount to anything. If the end brings me out wrong, ten angels swearing I was right would make no difference.”

In a similar way, Nehemiah very briefly denied the allegations, he took it to God in prayer, and then he got back to work. And again, here also we have an awesome pattern to follow today! As Christians, when we do what we know to be right, often people will make false statements against us, “Well, you guys just hate a certain class of people,” and on and on and on. Like Nehemiah, though, let us not get sucked into the argument. Instead, let us offer a very brief denial, “No, this is not what we are about,” let us take it to God in prayer, and then let us move on. Let us get back to working on the wall. Let us not get pulled aside. Let us not get distracted. If we are slandered, let us dump it on the Lord and get back to doing what we know we need to be doing.

III. **As we continue moving through this chapter, we find a third distraction in verses 10-14 as the enemy now tries outright INTIMIDATION.**

In verse 10, for whatever reason, Nehemiah stops in the home of a man who appears to be some kind of a prophet, and this man wants Nehemiah to run to the temple and hide there inside the temple for protection. And the warning is: If you do not do this, you will be assassinated. So here we have some seemingly religious advice, seemingly good words from a man of God. What we need to understand, though, is that only the priests were allowed inside the temple. So, first of all, this would have been a sin. But secondly, think about what would have happened to Nehemiah’s ability to lead. Generally speaking, we don’t want our leaders running and hiding in a time of national crisis. Since today is Father’s Day: What would we think of a father who sees a tornado coming and runs and hides in the basement, leaving his family out in the yard? That is pretty much what this false prophet wanted Nehemiah to do.

And so in response to this threat, we find Nehemiah’s answer in verse 11, ***“Should a man like me flee?”*** In other words, “No!” Nehemiah could see through the threat. Nehemiah could see what was happening here, Nehemiah could see that this was a trap (we see this in verse 13), he resisted any advice he knew was against the word of God, he resisted the message (even though it sounded religious), and so once again (in verse 14), Nehemiah goes to God in prayer before very quickly getting back to work.

So we have another example for us today. There are times when we might feel a little bit intimidated. Maybe we know the right thing to do, but there is something holding us back. Maybe there is a direct threat hanging out there somewhere. Maybe somebody in a fancy religious robe is telling us that we should not do what the Bible is telling us to do. There are so many possibilities here, but Nehemiah demonstrates that we are not to give in to intimidation. We are not to get distracted, even if the distraction comes in the name of religion.

Conclusion:

As we close, I want us to notice what happens starting in verse 15. Starting in verse 15, we find that the entire defensive wall around the city of Jerusalem was repaired and rebuilt in only 52 days. Not only that, but we also find here at the end (in verse 16) that the surrounding nations, when they saw that the wall had been completed, the surrounding nations ***“lost their confidence,”*** and the reason is, ***“they recognized that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.”*** And to me, this is interesting: Nowhere in the book of Nehemiah do we read about anything miraculous. In other words, there are no earthquakes, we don’t read about the wall building itself, we don’t have angels coming down to help lift giant stones into place – nothing miraculous. The wall was built with resolve and determination, the people saw what they needed to do and they did it, and yet as the enemy looked at that wall, they could see that it was done with God’s help.

As we ask what this passage means for us today, I would make two brief observations, two very brief suggestions based on what we have studied this morning: First of all, when it comes to those things we know we need to be doing (according to the word of God), we, like Nehemiah, need to practice saying “Yes” to God. In other words, we need to figure out what is truly important, and we need to lift that up and put whatever it is in first place.

But then, there is also a second lesson here, a second observation, and that is: We must also practice saying “No” to various distractions. I obviously don’t know what distracts you in your life right now. I don’t know what keeps you from doing what you need to do. But I do know what came up against Nehemiah – the temptation to talk instead of do, the constant criticism – rumors, slander, open letters, and then also the fear factor – the implied threats that some horrible thing will happen if we don’t turn away from what we know we need to be doing. Today, we have all kinds of distractions (and most of them are not necessarily evil) – the Internet, Facebook, various video games, sports, work, money, alcohol, friends. The enemy has had a lot of practice, and he knows that he can often pull us away from what is truly important by distracting us with other things that may even be good things. We need to practice, then, saying “No” to all of those distractions. We need to practice saying, ***“I am doing a great work and cannot come down.”***

Life is short. We have no idea whether all of us will ever again have the opportunity to be together in this life. And so at some point each week we want to give a reminder concerning what God has told us to do to be saved. Jesus died for our sins, he was buried, and he was raised up on the third day. We respond to that sacrifice just amazed at what he did for us. Specifically, we respond by turning away from sin, by turning our lives back toward God, by making the Good Confession (that we believe Jesus is the Son of God), and at that point we are ready to be buried with Christ in baptism for the forgiveness of our sins. At that point, our sins are forgiven and we are added to the Lord’s church. If you have any questions, let us know. But if you are ready to obey the good news right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com