



Central  
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Church

...to make and mature more followers of Christ

*When Things Get Personal*

Nehemiah 6:1–19

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*series: Nehemiah: Rebuilding Your Broken World*

I'm sure many of you have been tracking the spacecraft New Horizon's mission to Pluto. It blasted off in January 2006. It's been traveling 36,000 miles per hour for the last 9-1/2 years. It took just nine hours to pass the moon and it reached Jupiter the next year. It took just three minutes to cross the diameter of Pluto last week. It's an amazing accomplishment.

But with every mission there's obstacles. Spacecrafts typically have a set design lifetime, like warranties on cars. Over time, solar particles and cosmic rays can degrade the surface of the spacecraft or mess up the electronics. So long missions like this one are very challenging. To deal with that, they built into the electronics two of everything: two guidance control processors, two computers, two command processors, two recorders. If one fails, they can switch to the other. And what do you do when the sun is too weak to provide solar power? New Horizons carries nuclear power on board to solve that problem.

Nehemiah was on a mission as well. He'd been an exiled Jew living in Persia and serving as cupbearer to the King. His heart broke when he heard about the rundown condition of the walls around Jerusalem. He then got permission from the King to travel back to Jerusalem and lead his people in a huge rebuilding project of the walls and gates around the city. Why? Because he was passionate for the reputation of God and had a deep appreciation for how God's promises to his people were tied to that city. After a long journey, he arrived in Jerusalem and began to mobilize the Jewish people who'd already returned there. Under his leadership the work progressed to where the wall grew to half of its required height.

But like every important mission, this all took place amidst some very strong resistance. Every successful advance in building the walls was met with some form of opposition, which became more intense as time went on. It started with some of the local leaders simply being disturbed that Nehemiah had come to rebuild the walls. Then those same leaders began to ridicule and taunt the workers on the wall. Later they threatened to even attack the workers. Then Nehemiah had to deal with internal problems; dissension among his own people caused by greed.

Today we come to chapter 6 where the opposition against Nehemiah becomes very personal and even more intense. This is the oldest trick in town: When all else fails, go to the top; get the leader. An old NFL quarterback, Sonny Jorgensen, was asked if he ever wanted to quit because of all the mudslinging that came his way as leader of the team. He said, "I don't want to quit. I've been

in the game long enough to know that every quarterback, every week of the season, spends his time either in the penthouse or the outhouse."

Well said! If you lead anyone in anything, if you have it on your heart to do a great work of any kind to advance God's purposes, you can expect to spend much of your time as either the hero or the villain, in the penthouse or the outhouse. You see it here in chapter 6. On the one hand there's a very encouraging building report. In v. 1 Nehemiah says, "***I had rebuilt the wall and not a gap was left in it.***" In v. 15 he adds, "***So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days.***" This was a huge victory for the Jews and especially for Nehemiah. I can imagine his buddies sneaking up behind him to pour a bucket of ice over his head, or lift him high on their shoulders for a victory lap around the city. But that's not what happened. Rather, the progress and completion of the wall was met with a last ditch effort to bring him down. There are actually four attacks in this chapter. Each one is similar in that it was an indirect rather than a frontal attack. In other words, on the surface they appeared to be something other than what they really were. Nehemiah would need lots of discernment to see through them.

I want us to look at each of these and think about the different ways our enemy will seek to intimidate us and stop us from completing our mission. As a Christ follower, you have a mission in life. You have a calling. Your life matters. But you have an enemy too. The Bible says he's a liar and a murderer and a master deceiver, even disguising himself as an angel of light. His purpose is to instill fear in your heart and paralyze you from obeying God. Three times in this chapter Nehemiah says his enemies wanted to "frighten" and "intimidate" him (vv. 9, 14, 19). Our enemy wants to do the same to us, so let's look at how he works and how we can see through his schemes and stand against him.

### **Invitation**

The first attack came in the form of an invitation.

**When word came to Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall and not a gap was left in it—though up to that time I had not set the doors in the gates—Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message: "Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono" (verses 1–2a).**

These two men had opposed Nehemiah's work from the start. Here they send what appears to be a friendly invitation to meet in

a village on the plain of Ono. The plain of Ono was about 27 miles north of Jerusalem and it may have been considered neutral territory. It's like, "Hey, let's meet at a neutral place and work things out. I know we've been on differing sides on this whole thing, but let's get together and settle our differences once and for all."

That sounds good to me. I'll take peace over conflict any day. Yet look what Nehemiah writes next, **"But they were scheming to harm me"** (v. 2b). How did he know that? Did he have an informer? Was it a gut level feeling; a check in his spirit about their motives? We know Nehemiah was a man of prayer. Did he take this invitation into the presence of God and ask, "Lord, what should I with this? Should I go?" We don't know, but we do know he saw through it. Look what he did next.

**...so I sent messengers to them with this reply: "I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?" Four times they sent me the same message, and each time I gave them the same answer (verses 3–4).**

His words are brief and to the point. He doesn't dissect their motives. He just says, "Hey, I'm engaged in such an important work I can't stop and take the time to meet." I like how the NASB puts it better, "I am doing a great work and cannot come down." After all, if Ono was 27 miles away, with travel time we're talking about a week off. So he says no, but these guys are persistent. Four times they request a meeting, and four times he says the same thing, "I am doing a great work and cannot come down."

When I was training to be a pastor at Peninsula Bible Church, I started my own janitorial company to support us. But when my pastoral training was over I began looking for a position in a church. I interviewed with a church in Pleasanton and when they offered me a position as a youth pastor I was thrilled. It didn't matter the annual salary was \$16,500. But right at the same time a client in my janitorial business offered me a job cleaning his two Chuck E. Cheese restaurants. My jaw dropped when he offered to pay me \$14,500 a month! This was 1981 and I'd never heard of so much money! But this was one of those times where I had to say, "God has called me to a great work and I can't do that."

I think one of the enemy's tactics is distraction. And one of the things we all have to do from time to time is say "No." I think of this as it relates to our mission as a church. Our mission is to make and mature more followers of Christ. But there are so many things, even as a church, that can distract us from that. We're constantly having to say no to good things so we can focus on the best things. Great leaders refuse to be distracted from the one thing they've been called to do. Chuck Swindoll says, "You need to say 'Oh No!' to Ono." God has called each of us to do a great work. Don't be distracted. Don't take your eye off the ball.

## Innuendo

The first attack involved what seemed like a friendly invitation, and that invitation came four times. But the fifth time was different. Look what happens in verses 5–7.

**Then, the fifth time, Sanballat sent his aide to me with the same message, and in his hand was an unsealed letter in which was written: "It is reported among the nations—and Geshem says it is true—that you and the Jews are plotting to revolt, and therefore you are building the wall. Moreover, according to these reports you are about to become their king and have even appointed prophets to make this proclamation about you in Jerusalem: 'There is a king in Judah!' Now this report will get back to the king; so come, let us meet together."**

Now we go from invitation to innuendo. By the way, the letter was unsealed because it was read many times by many people on its journey from Samaria to Jerusalem. Sanballat is basically spreading a vicious rumor about Nehemiah that he's planning to rebel against Persia and to set himself up as King. Notice how he uses hearsay: "It is reported among the nations—and Geshem says it is true..." Rumors and innuendo regularly cite people of influence as sources of information. "Well, so-and-so said..."

How would you react to this? What do you do when someone spreads vicious lies about you? My first reaction is to fight back. Go to the source and set the record straight. If I were Nehemiah, this time around I'd catch the first train to Ono! But look what Nehemiah says.

**I sent him this reply: "Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head."**

**They were all trying to frighten us, thinking, "Their hands will get too weak for the work, and it will not be completed."**

**But I prayed, "Now strengthen my hands" (vv. 8–9).**

He does two things: he denies the rumor in a very matter-of-fact way, and then he prays. Clearly he resolved not to worry about his reputation or how the people might react to the accusation. These were matters beyond his control, and so he chooses to leave it with God. Notice how he's aware that the open letter with its false rumor was designed to weaken their hands for the work, so he turns to God and prays for strength. I believe there's an admission here by Nehemiah's that he **did** feel weak and was tempted to quit, but that's when he turned to God.

I'm not proud to tell you that in my almost 29 years at CPC I've been tempted to quit many times out of my own sense of weariness and the weakness that comes with it. At times I've been weakened by the consequences of my own stupidity, but I've also been weakened by the kind of thing Nehemiah was dealing with here. My wife will attest to the fact she's had to prop me up dozens of times when my hands were too weak for the work.

But I can honestly say it's been in times of prayer I've received inner strength to keep going. Paul said it so well, *"For when I am weak, then I am strong"* (2 Cor. 12:10b). And that strength most often comes through prayer to the Triune God and the sense of security and identity that brings. I can relate to what Maurice Wagner wrote about this: "Personal security...comes from our relationship to the three Persons of the Godhead. Our relationship to God the Father gives us a sense of belonging. We are members of his family and are secure in our Father-child relationship. Our union with Christ the Son give us a sense of worth. God loved us so much that he sent his son to die for our sins. With our redemption accomplished, God has made us joint heirs with Christ. This shows our value. Finally, the Holy Spirit's indwelling empowers us. We are made equal to every task."

## **Intimidation**

But the enemy wasn't finished yet. The third attack I'd label as intimidation.

**One day I went to the house of Shemaiah son of Delaiah, the son of Mehetabel, who was shut in at his home. He said, "Let us meet in the house of God, inside the temple, and let us close the temple doors, because men are coming to kill you—by night they are coming to kill you" (v. 10).**

Shemaiah was a prophet. For some unstated reason he's confined at home. He's what we call a shut-in. Maybe this was a ploy to get Nehemiah to visit him; we don't know for sure. But Nehemiah comes to his home and Shemaiah delivers a carefully crafted prophetic word from God, designed to strike fear in Nehemiah's heart. He tells Nehemiah of a plot to kill him at night. He advises they run to the temple for protection from his enemies. It was common in the ancient world to flee to a religious place for safekeeping.

But there's something wrong with this. Nehemiah isn't a priest. He's what we call a layman. And that means he isn't allowed to go beyond the altar of burnt offering at the Temple. If Nehemiah had taken this man's advice he'd have discredited himself as a leader of his people. So he knew there was something that smelled fishy about this so-called word from God. Look how Nehemiah responds.

**But I said, "Should a man like me run away? Or should someone like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go!" I realized that God had not sent him, but that he had prophesied against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. He had been hired to intimidate me so that I would commit a sin by doing this, and then they would give me a bad name to discredit me.**

**Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, my God, because of what they have done; remember also the prophet Noadiah and how she and the rest of the prophets have been trying to intimidate me (verses 11–14).**

There are a number of things I see in his response. I see courage: "Should a man like me run away?" No way, he says, I'm not going! Think of the impact on the workers if they saw their leader ("a man like me") run for his life. Nehemiah reminds me here of the German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer. During WWII as a 32-year-old young man, he learned all men his age had to register with the German military to support the Nazi cause. To refuse would mean a trip to a concentration camp. But in the nick of time he got an invitation to teach at a seminary in New York. Grateful for a way out of his dilemma, he booked passage, and in June 1939 found himself safe in America. Safe, but unhappy. His visit only lasted 26 days. In what one of his biographers called "the great decision" he went back to Berlin. For 5 years he rallied the churches of Germany to oppose Hitler's madness. In 1945, the Nazis arrested Bonhoeffer, sent him to a series of prisons and camps, and two weeks before the Allied troops arrived, they killed him. He was 39 years old. That's courage. "Should a man like me run away?"

In Nehemiah's response I also see a discernment rooted in his knowledge of God's word. He discerned Tobiah and Sanballat had hired this so-called prophet to intimidate him and get him to commit a sin by entering the temple, which in turn would discredit him. I love those words, "I realized that God had not sent him." Discernment is the ability to assess what you're dealing with by the appropriate criteria. Through discernment you sniff out what's beneath the surface. It's much more than just natural shrewdness; it comes to fruition only through being tuned to God's voice and to his written word, the Bible.

And, of course, as we've seen so many times before with Nehemiah there's prayer. It's another one of his "Get 'em" prayers. It seems there was more than just one false prophet involved because he mentions a woman named Noadiah and others who were trying to intimidate him by their prophesies. He asks the Lord not to forget what they all have done. The best thing about this is he's willing to let God deal with his enemies. Personal revenge isn't an option for him. Miroslav Volf, a Croatia theologian wrote, "To triumph fully, evil needs two victories, not one. The first victory happens when an evil deed is perpetrated; the second victory, when evil is returned. After the first victory, evil would die if the second victory did not infuse it with new life." Nehemiah doesn't return evil for evil; he asks God to deal with it.

Meanwhile, the work continued until we get this report.

**So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days. When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God (verses 15-16).**

The wall is completed and look who's backpedaling now! I love how it says they all realized God had his hand in this. I can see

Nehemiah just taking a deep breath. It must have given him great satisfaction.

## Intrigue

But how often do we take that deep breath only to find out there's more trouble on the horizon? Look at verses 16–19.

**When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God. Also, in those days the nobles of Judah were sending many letters to Tobiah, and replies from Tobiah kept coming to them. For many in Judah were under oath to him, since he was son-in-law to Shekaniah son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam son of Berekiah. Moreover, they kept reporting to me his good deeds and then telling him what I said. And Tobiah sent letters to intimidate me.**

Let's call this Intrigue. I believe this was the most difficult attack of all because it took place right when Nehemiah thought the battle was won. One writer said, "Let us be as watchful after the victory as before the battle." Now, after the wall is built, he has to deal again with this guy named Tobiah. Earlier in chapter 1 Tobiah was one of the guys who was upset when Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem to rebuild the wall. Here we see he's the classic politician; a well connected guy who knows how to work the system; knows the art of schmoozing. Letters go back and forth between him and the nobles. When it says that many were under oath to him that means many were indebted to him. We also see here he'd married into a very influential Jewish family. So the Jewish nobles are coming to Nehemiah and saying, "You know that Tobiah, he's not such a bad guy after all. Why are you so down on him, Nehemiah? Give the guy a break. He's done a lot of good things for our people." It strikes me that when we're successful, all of a sudden certain people will try to get on our team. For years I couldn't stand the NBA and had very little interest in the Warriors, but now? In the same way, there are people who haven't the slightest concern for the things of God, but they see a church that's growing and filled with important people and all of a sudden they get real religious!

But Nehemiah knows better. He says in the last line those letters going back and forth were meant to intimidate him. We don't know what Tobiah wrote, but again he meant to strike fear in the heart of Nehemiah. And this time, Nehemiah does nothing. The chapter just ends with a thud. No angry letters back from Nehemiah. No meeting with the Jewish nobles showing them Tobiah's true colors. He did nothing. He refused to play the game.

He just goes on with his life. There are times when it's best just to do nothing, especially when we're dealing with the Tobiahs in our lives. There will always be someone you see through but everyone else thinks is wonderful; someone who schmoozes his way through life; someone you constantly hear good reports about but you know better. The lesson from Nehemiah is you can't always get rid of them. And the best thing to do is wait it out and let God deal with them in his own way and time.

We've seen today that in any great mission or task God has given to us, there will be opposition. Most often it will be subtle and indirect. The devil is a schemer. Nobody can escape his sinister advances. Even Jesus was launched into his ministry only after a severe period of testing where the enemy sought to deflect his mission. The devil came to him offering good things he had every right to have: bread, dominion, and acclaim. But each time Jesus met his advances with biblical discernment. We've seen in this story the enemy is cunning, persistent, creative, untruthful, versatile and ever looking for clever fools to use to advance his purposes. Ultimately, he wants to intimidate you and instill fear in you so to move you from the very mission God has called you to.

How do we resist him? Let me leave you with four statements Nehemiah used and we can use in this battle. First, "I am carrying on a great project and cannot come down." Focus. Don't let anything distract you from the work.

Second, "Should a man like me run away?" Courage. Stand your ground. Don't let fear move you from your mission. Don't let anyone or anything distract you from God's call.

Third, "I realized that God had not sent him." Discernment. Just because someone says they're speaking for God, don't believe them. We need to be on guard because Satan is both a lion that devours and a serpent that deceives.

Fourth, "Strengthen my hands." Dependence. In your weakness turn to God. True courage doesn't mean you're never afraid, but you turn to him and draw on his strength to finish what he's called you to do.

These four statements echo across the centuries to us. They were essentially the same words that kept the Lord Jesus intact when the enemy sought to weaken him through fear and intimidation. It's these same words that by God's grace will keep us intact. But in the end, like Jesus, we may have to just stay silent before our accusers. Isaiah says, "He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he didn't open his mouth." Jesus was willing to let his Father have the last word. Are you?

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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