

Psst . . . Have You Heard?

Nehemiah – Part XI

Nehemiah 6

Introduction

In our study of the book of Nehemiah, we have observed the Red Dragon, the Devil, the Adversary, the roaring Lion, the Liar, and the Father of Lies attempt to stop Nehemiah from rebuilding the city of God. The attacks have come from the outside in the form of ridicule, fear, and discouragement. The problems have come from the inside with division, anger, and betrayal.

Now, in chapter 6, apparently the Dragon pulls out all the stops and launches one attack after another. They are painful, heart wrenching, and discouraging to Nehemiah. The attacks will come from both outsiders and insiders. It will be the loneliest and most fearful moments that Nehemiah will encounter.

There is one piece of armor that seems to get less attention than the others and yet, it is this piece, above all others, that protects Nehemiah, and every follower of God, against the assault of the enemy. It is that piece of armor, for the New Testament believer, called the helmet of salvation. The helmet protects the mind of the believer.

Cyril Barber, in his book on Nehemiah, makes a point that there are three areas in the believer's life that Satan attacks regularly and that each of the three areas relate directly to our relationship to the three Persons of the Godhead.

He wrote that our relationship with God the Father gives us a sense of belonging. We are sons and daughters of His family and we are secure in our Father-child relationship.

Our union with Christ, the Son of God, gives us our true sense of worth. In other words, God loves us so much that He sent His Son to die for our sins. With our redemption accomplished, we actually become joint heirs with Jesus Christ. This shows us our incredible worth and value to God.

Finally, the Holy Spirit's indwelling empowers us to live for Jesus Christ. We are made equal to every task. This gives us our competence to fulfill whatever God designs for us to do.

Our belonging, our worth, and our competency are directly related to our union with God.

The Dragon loves nothing more than to attack us on those three fronts. He attacks our sense of security or belonging. He attacks our sense of worth, or value, to God and the church. He attacks our sense of competency, so that we are paralyzed by doubt and fear.

The piece of armor that combats and protects is the helmet of salvation. Reflecting, remembering, and acknowledging the biblical truth of our redemption and our relationship with each Person of the Godhead protects our minds against these lures of the Red Dragon.

Nehemiah will face his most difficult battles because they are primarily battles that will require biblical thinking. It will require that emotions and will be saturated by what he already knows is true about who God is and who he is. It will be his toughest battle yet. One commentator even referred to chapter 6 of Nehemiah as, "A Battle of Nerves."

The Dragon's Final Attempts

Let us find out why.

An attempt to create . . . (6:1-4)

“Let’s trick him!”

1. The first attempt was an attempt to create confusion.

Look at chapter 6, verses 1 through 4.

Now it came about 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, that 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. 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?” They sent messages to me four times in this manner, and I answered them in the same way.

Did you notice the timing of this request? Verse 1 tells us that the walls are finished, but the gates have not been hung. It is the last possible moment for the enemy to stop the work from being completed. It is also the best time for Nehemiah to feel somewhat confident that the project is going to actually be completed.

And, the request from his enemies comes in the form of a polite invitation to begin dialoguing together,

. . . Come, let us meet at . . . Ono. . .

Ono happened to be an oasis – a retreat location for the wealthy. It had fertile land with trees and water. “Come on, Nehemiah, we’ve dogged your heels, but let’s get together and talk it over. Relax for just a day or two.”

Four times they asked if he wanted an all expense paid vacation at the Ono Resort and Conference Center. And, four times, Nehemiah said the same thing, “No. No, to Ono.”

By the way, he ran the risk of looking cold and heartless. While he discerned that they were trying to trick him, no one else realized that.

It was an attempt to create confusion. On the outside, it looked like they wanted to make amends, talk it over, reach an agreement. They have been

doing that in the Middle East for centuries now. But underneath, as Nehemiah writes in his diary, in verse 2b,

. . . But they were planning to harm me.

One commentator postulated what the newspapers would read, had they printed them in this day,

From Samaritan sources it is learned that Governor Nehemiah of Judah has again turned down the invitation of Sanballat, head of the district of Samaria, to come to the village of Ono for a conference of the big four; Gashmu, leader of the Edomites, Tobiah, leader of the Ammonites, Sanballat and Nehemiah. Sanballat issued an announcement today in which he sharply criticized Nehemiah for his repeated refusal to appear at such a meeting – the purpose of which, according to Sanballat, is “simply to adjust the relations among these rulers and bring about peace in the area.”

The following week, another article would appear,

The Samaritan leader claims that this is the fourth time that Nehemiah has asked for a postponement of the conference on the grounds that he is too busy. This despite the fact that Ono, the place designated as the site of the meeting, is no more than a four and a half hour ride from Jerusalem. “The responsibility for anything that may happen and for the blood that may be shed rests solely upon Nehemiah,” the announcement concludes.

The truth was, it was a pseudo-peaceful sounding invitation, but the bottom line was deceit.

For reasons known only to God, Nehemiah was able to discern that this was a trap. And, his answer, four times, was, “No. No. No. No.”

By the way, that is a wonderful word to learn how to say. You should say, “No,” more often to your children. You need to say, “No,” to television commercials. You need to say, “No,” to temptation. You need to say, “No,” more often to the shopping mall. Amen?

Let us practice saying that little powerful word together. On the count of three. One, two, three, “NO!”

Say it again, louder, “NO!”

Will you listen to temptation's voice this week?
"NO!"

Will you live for yourself this week? "NO!"

Am I almost finished with my sermon? "NO!"

An attempt to create . . . (6:5-9)

"Let's discredit him!"

2. The second attempt was an attempt to create a scandal.

Continue to verses 5 through 7.

Then Sanballat sent his servant to me in the same manner a fifth time with an open letter in his hand. 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. And 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."

"We can't trick Nehemiah, so let's discredit him. Let's tell everyone that Nehemiah wants to rebuild Jerusalem just so he can sit on the throne and be the king."

This was a bombshell of a letter. It started a rumor that could destroy the credibility of Nehemiah. And that, ladies and gentlemen, was the point, that was their hope.

Can you imagine how this news rifled through the camp? "Nehemiah wants to be the king of Jerusalem."

Frankly, the more interesting the gossip, the more likely it is to be untrue; and yet, the faster it will travel. There is something about all of us that causes us to believe things that are whispered to us. Any sentence that begins with the words, "Psst, have you heard?" is a sure way of getting the full attention of the other person. And, once it is out, it is out. Many times the damage is irretrievable done. Trying to squash a rumor is like trying to un-ring a bell.

It is no wonder that of the seven things we are told in the book of Proverbs that God hates, three of them have to do with the tongue.

My friends, if you have ever been gossiped about or rumored about, you can learn a lot from

Nehemiah's response. We are given that, starting with verse 8.

Then I sent a message to him saying, "Such things are you are saying have not been done, but you are inventing them in your own mind."

That is it, he did not say, "Listen, here are ten reasons why you're wrong . . . and I can explain why some misguided prophets are announcing I'm the next king of Jerusalem, but I haven't hire them . . .".

There was no self-defense, no long letter in return, no self-vindication. There was just simply, "It's not true. You've made it up."

But, would you notice how Nehemiah stays focused on the real issue? Continue to verse 9a, in his response.

For all of them were trying to frighten us, thinking, "They will become discouraged with the work and it will not be done." . . .

Unfortunately the gossip spread, and many in Jerusalem become suspicious of Nehemiah. In fact, later in this chapter, you discover that the leaders of the tribe of Judah believed the rumor and added to the discrediting of Nehemiah.

There is no insurance policy for word of mouth.

This so hurt Nehemiah that he did not pray about the invitation to come to the resort town of Ono. He did not pray when they threatened, in the previous chapter, to fight him with swords and spears. But, after being accused of having deceitful motives and proud ambitions, he prays, in verse 9b,

. . . But now, O God, strengthen my hands.

"O God, strengthen my hands!"

Nehemiah, with his tough exterior and "nothing is too big to tackle" attitude, is deeply hurt. He writes here in his journal, "O God, strengthen my hands."

There is an article that says this,

I have no respect for justice. I maim without killing, I break hearts and ruin lives. I am cunning and malicious and gather strength the older I am alive. The more I am quoted, the more I am believed. My victims are helpless. They cannot protect themselves against me, because I have no name and no face. To track me down is impossible. The harder you try, the more elusive I become. I topple governments and wreck friendships. I ruin careers and cause sleepless nights and

heartaches. I make innocent people cry in their pillows. Even my name hisses. I am called Gossip. I make headlines and headaches. I am nobody's friend.

How do we protect our church, our families, and our work ethic from the erosion brought about by the tongue?

Alan Redpath, who once pastored the large Moody Church in Chicago, wrote how he encouraged the members of his church, during a particularly stressful time in their church history, to subscribe to a simple formula before speaking.

He wanted them to think before speaking, so he gave them an acrostic – T.H.I.N.K.

T – for, Is it true?

H – for, Is it helpful?

I – for, Is it inspirational?

N – for, Is it necessary?

K – for, Is it kind?

If it did not pass the T.H.I.N.K. test, it was not spoken to another person. That is good advice for the church, but it is good advice for life. If you are running down your coworkers or your boss, you are wrong. As a believer, you have no business working with that attitude. The T.H.I.N.K. test will revolutionize your work environment, and it just may revolutionize your home and your church environment as well.

The enemies of Nehemiah, and of the work of God, said, “Let’s trick him.” Then, “Let’s discredit him.”

But Nehemiah kept on building.

An attempt to create . . . (6:10-14)

“Let’s tempt him!”

3. The third attempt was an attempt to create compromise.

“If we can’t trick him or discredit him, let’s tempt him to sin.”

Look at verse 10.

And 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.”

It sounded good – coming from a priest. In fact, he was a prophet and a priest. The English translation obscures the fact that this is in the form of a prophecy, as if it came from God.

Imagine somebody telling you, “Listen, I got word that some of your enemies are coming over some night and they’re going to kill you. You’d better hide.”

Imagine trying to sleep after hearing that. You would hear every noise, every dog bark, every rustle of a tree branch.

So this priest says to Nehemiah, “Come over to the temple and let’s hide out together in the Holy Place.”

But Nehemiah saw through this phony prophecy, as we are told in verses 11 through 13.

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.” Then I perceived that surely God had not sent him, but he uttered his prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. 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.

Was it sin for Nehemiah to be afraid? No. Was it sin for Nehemiah to hide during the night? No!

If you look closely, you will notice that Shemaiah proposed that they hide in the Holy Place – where only priests could enter. To go in there, even though it would mean being rescued from assassins, would violate the Law of God.

Ladies and gentlemen, he would rather lose his life than sin.

How much sin will you allow in your life before you become even a little bit bothered? Here is a man who would rather risk his life than risk losing the pleasure of God on his life.

Discerning Good Counsel From Bad

By the way, this provides great insight as to how to determine good counsel from bad. Let me give you three things to ask yourself:

- Does the counsel violate your character?
- Does the counsel contradict scripture?
- Does the counsel hinder your commitment?

Continue to verse 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.

An attempt to create . . . (6:15-19)

“Let’s abandon him!”

4. The fourth attempt was an attempt to create division.

“We can’t trick him or discredit him or tempt him, so let’s abandon him. Skip to verses 17 through 19.

Also in those days many letters went from the nobles of Judah to Tobiah, and Tobiah’s letters came to them. 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. Moreover, they were speaking about his good deeds in my presence and reported my words to him. Then Tobiah sent letters to frighten me.

I personally could not take a week of this, could you? But Nehemiah endured it for months and even years. Tobiah was the enemy of God’s work, but here you have prophets, a prophetess, and leaders in Judah who were constantly telling Nehemiah what a great man Tobiah was, as we are told in verse 19. In other words, “C’mon Nehemiah, you need to get over your problem with Tobiah. He’s really doing us all a favor. We need him around.”

Yet, all the while, according to the last part of verse 19, Tobiah is sending letters to Nehemiah trying to scare him away.

You could circle a word that appears throughout chapter 6 – the word frighten. They constantly tried to frighten Nehemiah into quitting. But he just would not quit.

Now verses 15 and 16,

So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. And it came about 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.

Can you imagine any sweeter words than these, “So the wall was completed”?

“The wall is finished. Put away your tools, take down the scaffolding, swing the massive gates shut and bolt them tight. We finished it.”

Application:

When Believers Resist the Lure

When believers resist the lure of the Dragon and keep on building, two things eventually happen:

1. The first thing that happens is that God’s work reaches completion. Think about it – for ninety years they had not been able to do it. But this time, the people had their hearts in the work and had a leader who would not quit. I can only imagine the celebration as the nations around them realized that all their plotting, planning, intimidating, and rumor mongering had ultimately failed.
2. Something else happens, dear friends, God’s name receives the glory. Would you look back at verse 16 again,

And it came about when all our enemies heard of it, and all the nations surrounding us saw it, they lost their confidence; . . .

why?

. . . for they recognized that this work had been accomplished . . .

because of Nehemiah’s leadership . . .
because the people were skilled at building . . .
. because conditions were favorable and the king of Persia had provided lumber for the gates. NO!

. . . with the help of our God.

These unbelievers knew that someone supernatural had to have been involved in order for the walls to have been rebuilt in just fifty-two days.

What a way to live. To stay at the hard labor of building families, marriages, homes, and a church, so that those around us can only explain us in terms of God’s involvement. That is vindication enough!

God is glorified and His cause advanced. Is it any wonder then, that the Dragon battles whatever God builds? Is it any surprise then, that there are no opportunities for the kingdom of heaven without opposition from the kingdom of hell?

Expect it. Be alert to it. As Ephesians, chapter 6, verse 12, says, when we attempt to build something for the kingdom of light,

. . . our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.

So keep building the walls of your character, your marriage, your personal walk with Christ, your friendships, your relationships and testimony to unbelievers and know, all the while, that the Dragon will continually drop the lures into the waters of your life.

Dudley Tyng was a well-known speaker in the eighteen hundreds. He was a young man who lived on a farm. In 1858, he had just finished speaking to five thousand young men at the Young Men's Christian Association, or the YMCA, as we know it today. After he preached, one thousand of the young men accepted the free gift of salvation.

That day, he returned to his farm and decided to go to the barn to watch the men shelling corn. He got a little too close to the machine and his jacket was caught. His arm was pulled into the grinding gears of that machine and was lacerated beyond repair. In a few hours, he would die. Medicine was so primitive at that time, and the loss of blood was too great.

His father was there and reminded Dudley that thousands of people were gathering to hear him preach again that evening. What did he want said to them? Dudley Tyng strained to get the words out of his failing lips, and said, "Tell the people to stand up for Jesus."

That night, the assembly hall was packed with people expecting to hear Dudley preach. But, instead of hearing him preach, they learned of his accident and death. Then, they were given the words of his final message. George Duffield heard those last

words and sat down and composed a poem. The poem was put to music and we know the hymn as,

Stand up, stand up for Jesus, ye soldiers of the cross;

Lift high His royal banner, it must not suffer loss;

From victory unto victory His army shall he lead,

Till every foe is vanquished, and Christ is Lord indeed.

Stand up stand up for Jesus, stand in His strength alone;

The arm of flesh will fail you, ye dare not trust your own;

Put on the gospel armor, each piece put on with prayer;

Where duty calls or danger, be never wanting there.

Stand up stand up for Jesus, the strife will not be long;

This day the noise of battle, the next, the victor's song;

To him that overcometh, a crown of life shall be;

He with the King of glory shall reign eternally.

In other words, just keep building. Let finished walls answer the Dragon. Build to the glory and honor of God, our faithful Father and our sovereign Lord.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 5/21/2000 by Stephen Davey.

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