

The Attacks Get Personal – Nehemiah 6:1-14

Scripture Reading: Psalm 31:14-20

Introduction

As we have seen over the past two Sundays, Satan loves to do whatever he can to distract God's people from God's business

First, in Chapter 4, we saw him use direct opposition from enemy forces from without in an attempt to frighten the Judeans into ceasing construction on the wall and we saw how that attempt only served to strengthen their resolve

Then we was in Chapter 5 how Satan attempted to leverage conflict within the Judean community in Jerusalem to bring about a spirit of disunity that threatened to shatter the cooperation needed to complete the wall

And we saw how that scheme may have actually caused construction to halt for a time until Nehemiah worked out a solution to the problem and brought the two sides back together

So far, Satan is 0 for 2 but he is nothing if not tenacious and as we begin chapter 6 he isn't finished yet

When we last received a progress report in 4:6 all of the gaps in the wall had been closed but the wall was only half its planned height

Now as Chapter 6 opens we see that the wall was completed except for the hanging of the gates and Satan turns his attention to a different target – Nehemiah himself

And Satan came at Nehemiah with three different lines of attack each designed to either do away with him or harm him in some way

And we see that Satan reverted to using the same tools he had used in an earlier attack; Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem

We were first introduced to these three in Chapter 2

Sanballat is referred to in **Nehemiah 2:19** as Sanballat the Horonite indicating that he was a native of Horon which was located about 18 miles northwest of Jerusalem

Historical records also inform us that Sanballat was the governor of Samaria but we know from Nehemiah 13:28 that his daughter was married to the son of Eliashib the high priest and we know that he had two sons who he gave Jewish names

From all of this we can rightly conclude that Sanballat was an ambitious politician who was eager to please his Persian masters and maintain his power by currying favor with them and his part in these attacks smells of opportunism and a bit of desperation

Tobiah is first introduced to us in the same verse [**Neh. 2:19**] as “the Ammonite servant” and we've seen him function very much like a toady to Sanballat thus far

Tobiah is a Jewish name and, like Sanballat, Tobiah has familial connection through his son's marriage to the daughter of a high-ranking official in Jerusalem and he is also keen to protect his political power and prestige

Geshem is referred to as “the Arab” and in the opinion of many Bible scholars Geshem was the most powerful of the trio He and his son ruled an alliance of Arabian tribes that had taken over and ruled Edom and Moab which lay to the east and south of Judah and the territory that lay to the southwest

Together these three make up a kind of unholy trinity that stands continually in opposition to the triune God of Israel

And in the verses before us this morning they come at Nehemiah with three different lines of attack

First they use **intrigue**, then **innuendo**, and finally they try **intimidation** and how Nehemiah responds to their attacks is informative for us today as we know that we will also likely face these same kinds of attacks as we work for God

I invite you to join me in your Bible as we begin by looking at Nehemiah 6:1-4 and Nehemiah's enemies used intrigue to try to harm him

I. Intrigue

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), Sanballat 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. And 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?" And they sent to me four times in this way, and I answered them in the same manner.

The three conspirators called for a meeting with Nehemiah and suggested that it take place on neutral ground in one of the villages on the plain of Ono somewhere between 20 and 30 miles from Jerusalem

Everything about the proposed meeting seemed friendly enough and perhaps a sign of acceptance of the reality that Jerusalem now had walls and the recognition that they were all going to have to get along as neighbors

The offer seems to have been designed to flatter Nehemiah and to appeal to his personal pride at having achieved his goal of rebuilding the wall thereby removing the cause of the derision that Israel had been suffering

Still, accepting the invitation would have required at least a day's journey each way for Nehemiah and whatever time he would be detained while meeting together with them even if everything were on the up and up

But God blessed Nehemiah with the gift of discernment and he was able to see through the flattery to perceive that his enemies intended to harm him once they got him far from the territory he governed

It's not difficult at all to imagine the communique that would have been sent to Jerusalem:

We are very sorry to inform you that, while on his way to the summit in Ono, Governor Nehemiah met with an unfortunate accident when his chariot overturned after hitting a large rock in the road. We are saddened to report to you that by the time we came upon the scene of the accident he had succumbed to his injuries. Please accept our most profound condolences...

Nehemiah had nothing to gain from this invitation and everything to lose

However, he recognized what the three were up to and he turned down their invitation not once but four times

Notice that even though he knew what they were up to he didn't allude to his suspicions in his refusal

Nehemiah knew there was a time to remain quiet and to keep one's cards close to the vest so he simply told them that he was involved with an important project that couldn't be interrupted

There are at least three lessons we need to learn from Nehemiah's example

First, we need to be **focused** on what God would have us doing and refuse to be distracted by other good things

There are innumerable worthy things for the Christ-follower to be involved with and when Satan can't knock us off track by any other means he isn't above trying to dilute our efforts through distraction

Thanks to technology we have more opportunities for ministry vying for our time, attention, labor, and dollars today than the church has ever had

And the reality is that many times the opportunities assailing us can cause distraction and distraction will kill momentum as we lose focus on what God would have us be doing

The enemy would like nothing more than for God's people to lose sight of what God has given them to do and to get them busy doing other "worthwhile" things

The **second** thing we see in Nehemiah's response is that he was **steadfast**

Four times he responded in the exact same way but he was resolute in what he knew to be right

I'm sure that Sanballat and the others thought that Nehemiah was being completely unreasonable

They might well have thought him mean-spirited, intolerant, and perhaps even bigoted – all names Christ-followers are called today when we stand firm on issues like abortion, same-sex marriage, transgenderism, and so forth

Commitment to biblical truth and principle is often described as inflexibility and outdated, Neanderthal thinking and cause those who hold firmly to them to be criticized and shunned

But there are things that are worth standing up for and about which to refuse to yield an inch

And for us to know what God would have us focus on and when to stand firm requires the **third** thing we see in Nehemiah during this occasion is that Nehemiah had **discernment**

Sadly, discernment is a commodity of which the church is sorely lacking today

Many believers follow authors, leaders, and teachers simply because what they say sounds good without stopping to consider whether they are right

As we've seen in our previous studies, Nehemiah remained close to God and that's how one develops the discernment to see things the way God sees them

We need to be in the Word and know what the Bible says and we need to be in constant communication with God in prayer seeking his heart and asking for wisdom as we go about our daily lives

Increased discernment comes from spiritual maturity and spiritual maturity is born of spiritual disciplines

Since Nehemiah successfully rebuffed their invitation his enemies had to turn to another tactic and they chose to go after him using innuendo

II. Innuendo

Look with me at verses 5-7 [**Neh. 6:5-7**] –

In the same way Sanballat for the fifth time sent his servant to me with an open letter in his hand. In 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. And 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."

After being turned down four times, things aren't quite so cordial any longer as Sanballat puts forth the idea that the Judeans are plotting rebellion against Persia and planning to install Nehemiah as their king

But Sanballat was careful to give himself distance and deniability as he used a tactic that is often used in verbal attacks by framing his charges as a report of what other people are saying

People who make accusations love to hide behind weasel words like; "I've heard people saying..." because they think it gives their statements more credence while allowing them to claim the accusation isn't coming from them

I remember a Dilbert comic strip from some years ago where the pointy haired boss got called out for doing just that

It's a cheesy tactic that should be called out every time it's used

But Sanballat goes even further and rather slyly lets it be known that Artaxerxes will be hearing all about it

Meaning of course that they would be sure to pass the information along but in such a way that it appears he's genuinely concerned and dismayed that Nehemiah will be getting into trouble with the Persian king

And Sanballat again offers an alliance because if Artaxerxes gets upset Nehemiah will need all the friends he can get so of course it would be in Nehemiah's best interest to come and meet with them

Nehemiah knew that what Sanballat was accusing him of was untrue but Sanballat was shrewd in that he sent it in an open, unsealed letter in the hope and likely knowledge that someone would read it and the slander would spread and cause fear in the Jewish community

In my younger years, I was a member of a group of guys who got together to lift weights and we had a saying we were fond of repeating; “If the mind doesn’t believe it, the body can’t heave it” meaning that doubt would lead to defeat

And that’s what Sanballat was hoping for in this case –

That the threat of even a false report to Artaxerxes would cause the Jews to have second thoughts about what they were doing and cause them to falter in their resolve and maybe even abandon the project

Nehemiah responds in verses 8-9 [**Neh. 6:8-9**] first by telling Sanballat very succinctly that what he was accusing was an untrue and self-generated fantasy and then doing what we’ve seen him do so often in times of need; he prayed

Then I sent to him, saying, “No such things as you say have been done, for you are inventing them out of your own mind.” For 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.

Notice how plainly Nehemiah responded – just one short sentence

He didn’t go on and on with lengthy debate with Sanballat – that would have been a waste of his time and a distraction Sanballat already knew that what he was saying was false and he didn’t care as long as his accusations and threats had the desired effect of stopping the wall through instilling fear

But there are always some who are prone to believing such rumors and others who are ruled by their concern about what other people think and say about them so Nehemiah asked God to give him strength to deal with the fallout

So what can we learn from how Nehemiah handled this tactic of Sanballat?

First, we need to learn to weigh the criticisms and accusations that come our way rather than count them

Nehemiah knew the accusations were false and it didn’t matter how many people came forward to testify to their truth

A lie is a lie even if a million people swear to its truth

And while we always want to be sure to take criticisms that come our way seriously and check our actions and motives, when we know them to be false we shouldn’t give them any more time and energy

Second, we can choose to not be afraid of what others think and say

Far too many people live in a state of paralysis over what people are saying or might say about them

Folks, people are going to talk no matter what you do and often their talk is going to be negative – we are far more prone to groan and complain and accuse than we are to rejoice and praise and commend – that’s our nature

They say if you have a bucket of live crabs you can leave it sitting without a cover on it with no fear the crabs will escape

Because as each crab fights and struggles to reach the rim of the bucket and freedom he will pull the others above him down

And we can be just like that as we search for our own significance

But fear over what others are saying is a choice – no one can make us afraid we have to choose fear

2Timothy 1:7 tells us: *God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control*

No one can be successful working for God if they are living in fear of what others are saying about them and being controlled by what other people might be thinking

So since you can’t stop anyone else’s tongue from wagging determine to know the truth and not let rumors, innuendo, and lies distract you from what you are doing

And then **third**, always turn the matter over to God and let him handle it

We have seen this pattern in Nehemiah's life over and over again and it should always be our go-to response whether in good times or bad

Pray for God to strengthen you and protect you against the false attacks and leave it in his hands so you can focus on what he has given you to do

I skipped over one of Sanballat's false accusations found in verse 7 on purpose so I could address it here as I introduce our third main point of the sermon

In verse 7 [**Neh. 6:7**] Sanballat accused Nehemiah of hiring prophets to prophesy and say that he should be made king. It's an absurd claim on its face because Nehemiah didn't desire to be made king but it's also ironic considering that was precisely the next step the Sanballat and Tobiah took as they turned to outright intimidation of Nehemiah

III. Intimidation

Look with me at verses 10-13 [**Neh. 6:10-13**]

Now 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." But 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." And 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. For 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.

What we have here is obviously a very brief account of what took place and there are a good number of details that God simply didn't choose to record for us in his Word

For instance, we don't know why Shemaiah was confined to his home or why Nehemiah saw fit to visit him there

Presumably, Shemaiah sent word to Nehemiah asking for him to visit and once he was there he told Nehemiah that his life was in serious, immediate jeopardy and offered him safe haven in the temple

The context of this account makes it appear that Shemaiah presented this problem and its solution as if it were a prophecy from God

And it sounds reasonable enough – Nehemiah knows all too well that Sanballat and his cronies want to harm him

But Nehemiah doesn't buy it for a moment and he responds with two rebuttals

First, he asks, "*Should such a man as I run away?*" which might seem to be a bit arrogant but Nehemiah's point is that he is the appointed governor of the region

For him to run and hide behind closed doors at the mere threat of violence would be embarrassingly inappropriate and would discredit him in the eyes of the people

I would imagine that when Nehemiah heard what Shemaiah had to say he was already regretting coming to his house

After all, the people would have likely seen him and his actions could well have already been interpreted as uncertainty on his part but to run and hide would have been a sure sign of resignation to defeat

Second, Nehemiah asks, "*And what man such as I could go into the temple and live?*"

In **Numbers 18:7** we see God's instructions to Aaron regarding who was allowed entrance into the temple

And you and your sons with you shall guard your priesthood for all that concerns the altar and that is within the veil; and you shall serve. I give your priesthood as a gift, and any outsider who comes near shall be put to death.

Clearly, Nehemiah wasn't a priest and he would have been disobeying God if he took Shemaiah's advice

Nehemiah undoubtedly knew the account of King Uzziah found in 2Chronicles 26 when Uzziah dared to go into the temple only to have God strike him with leprosy

There was provision made for seeking asylum from a feared killer but it was connected to the altar which was in the temple courtyard and not in the temple interior behind closed doors as Shemaiah was suggesting

And once again we see Nehemiah demonstrate discernment and knowledge of God's Word as he recognized that Shemaiah was giving counsel that was contrary to God's Word and therefore not to be heeded

Then he put the pieces together and recognized that Shemaiah was a hireling whose mission was to at the very least bring shame and discredit to Nehemiah

And in the final verse under consideration today [**Neh. 6:14**] we see Nehemiah go before the Lord with another imprecatory prayer where he asks God to deal righteously with those who were acting against him

Remember 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.

While we would expect that the prophets would be on the front lines of encouragement we see that a number of them were actually working against Nehemiah as he tried to accomplish the work God had given him to do

Again, the details of just who these prophets were and what they were actually doing is not shared with us

But what we see from Nehemiah's example is the importance of knowing God's Word so that we can judge all things against it and be careful to do what it says

Nehemiah refused to be intimidated and he stood firm once more without going into long-winded discussion of the matter

He simply pointed to the principles found in God's Word and refused to go against them using minimal but sufficient words

He continues to trust in God and prays for God to give him courage and strength and to deal with his adversaries justly

And he prevails in the struggle

Conclusion

Once again this week we see that God regularly chooses not to prevent his people from facing attacks

And while we might prefer a straight and easy road from point A to point Z, God often allows the complication of opposition to enter in and is not threatened at all by it

Nehemiah's God-given task was to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem but Christ-followers today have been given the task of building relationships with unbelievers in order to present the gospel to them, the establishment of local churches for the edification of the saints, and the development of Christian character in all Christ-followers

Sadly, though, there are people who, although they might not think they are actually opposing God, see a conflict between what the church is doing and their own preferences

And they may try to interfere with the work through the methods of intrigue, innuendo, and even intimidation

And while there are no easy answers we see from the example of Nehemiah that what we need to deal with those tactics are discernment, focus, steadfastness, courage, judgment, and a clear understanding of God's Word

So that we won't be overcome by distractions that seem good, criticisms that cause doubt, and fear that weakens

But most of all we need faith which is complete trust, confidence, and reliance on God to sustain us and see us through as we stay the course

Let's pray

Psalm 31:14-20 (page 462)

But I trust in you, O Lord; I say, "You are my God."

My times are in your hand; rescue me from the hand of my enemies and from my persecutors!

Make your face shine on your servant; save me in your steadfast love!

O Lord, let me not be put to shame, for I call upon you; let the wicked be put to shame; let them go silently to Sheol.

Let the lying lips be mute, which speak insolently against the righteous in pride and contempt.

Oh, how abundant is your goodness, which you have stored up for those who fear you and worked for those who take refuge in you, in the sight of the children of mankind!

In the cover of your presence you hide them from the plots of men; you store them in your shelter from the strife of tongues.