

Nehemiah: A Man of Focus

REVIEW: This is week 7 in our study on Nehemiah. We have seen many great things from Nehemiah. We have seen him as a man of compassion, weeping for his homeland, and the people in it. From that we have continued to ask, and should continue to ask and pray toward understanding what breaks our hearts in this world for God. We have seen Nehemiah as a pray-er. We have seen him as a strategist, understanding that planning and prayer are not opposite activities. We have seen him motivate the people, not with external things, but with a sense of where God wanted them to go. We have seen the variety of people employed to rebuild the walls and likened that to the church - a variety of people coming together for a common goal. We have watched Nehemiah handle opposition from outside the walls, and from within the walls.

INTRO: Today we will see Nehemiah handle opposition yet again. However, today's opposition is less direct, and far more subtle. Because of its subtlety, it can make it extremely dangerous.

Nehemiah 6:1-14

- I. Sanballat is getting desperate - 6:1
 - A. Back in chapter 4, we saw how Sanballat and crew got angry that the wall was being worked on
 1. They thought that the Jews could not erect the wall
 2. They thought "even a fox" could make that wall fall down
 3. They will NEVER get that wall up
 4. And yet, they see the gaps in the wall being rebuilt
 - B. Here in chapter six we can see that Sanballat is getting pretty desperate
 1. So far he has tried intimidating the Jews
 2. He has tried threats of subterfuge
 3. He has tried threats of open violence against the workers
 4. He has tried everything short of all out warfare, which would most likely get back to the king
 - a) Then the king would have to wonder why his provinces were not getting along
 - b) Then troops come in - troops that most likely would "shoot first and ask questions later"
 5. But there is one tactic that Sanballat has not tried yet
 - a) This tactic would be tried in a variety of ways, but it comes down to one thing
 - b) Let's go after the man himself, Nehemiah
 - (1) If we can get rid of Nehemiah, we can stop the work

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- (2) Even if we can just make Nehemiah look bad, we can stop the work
 - c) It's a good plan - Nehemiah is under a lot of pressure and all they have to do is make him crack
 - (1) Many people do not realize how much pressure a leader is under
 - (a) Leaders get blamed for things they didn't do
 - (b) Or criticized for things they tried to do
 - (c) They are misquoted or misunderstood
 - i) And rarely are they given an opportunity to set the record straight
 - (d) If they act quickly, they are reckless
 - (e) If they take their time, they are cowards or don't care
 - (f) And spiritual leaders also have an enemy that wants to destroy them at every turn called Satan
 - (g) Personally I can attest to every one of these things - just in the last few years
 - (2) Maybe many people do realize the pressures of leadership and that is why we see few people taking hold of leadership
 - (3) It not only helps and encourages your leader for you to be praying for them, it helps you too
- II. Sanballat tried compromise - 6:2-4
- A. Instead of opposing Nehemiah and the workers, Sanballat and crew decide to try to become friends
 - 1. "Hey, Nehemiah, come out and we can talk and be friends. No need for all this hostility."
 - 2. "So come to this area and meet with us. It is half way between Jerusalem and Samaria. You can even pick the town, Nehemiah!"
 - a) The problem was the area in which they wanted to meet was at the far northern edge of the territory of the Jews
 - (1) Which that alone is not safe
 - (2) Nehemiah is stretched to the edge of his resources and supplies to go out there
 - b) The other problem is time
 - (1) It would have taken Nehemiah a day to get there, a day for the conference, and a day to get back
 - (a) Jerusalem has no gates!
 - (b) If the leader leaves, that can cause problems
 - B. Nehemiah's reply teaches us a few things
 - 1. First, a leader needs to learn to say 'no'

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- a) Whether you lead an international business, or family, or a sports team, the leader has to know when to say 'no'
 - (1) Will this opportunity take us closer to our goal as a team?
 - (2) Is this opportunity a chance to serve the Lord, or is it more about winning man's approval?
 - b) Who do you say, 'no' to?
 - (1) Friends? Enemies? Your kids? Your spouse? Satan himself?
 - (2) Answer: yes
 - (a) There are times when you may need to say no to all of these
 - (b) Even family. Family often gets held up as an excuse not to participate in things that are for our growth in the Christian life
 - i) God expects to be first in your life, and proven out by your actions
 - ii) God does not expect you to abandon your family, just that He still has first place
 - iii) There will be times when you have to tell your family 'no' so that you can pursue God's greater thing
2. Second it teaches us compromise and cooperation can be a good thing IF there are no moral or spiritual issues
- a) Be careful who you cooperate or compromise for
 - b) Compromise can be great in a healthy marriage for example
 - c) Compromise can be healthy in church as well
 - d) Depending on what the compromise is over, it can also be deadly
3. Third thing Nehemiah teaches us is conviction
- a) He knew that Sanballat and crew were lying and wanted to kill him
 - b) Second he was convinced of the greatness of the work of God (v.3)
 - (1) Nehemiah could have let himself be distracted - if so, where would the leadership be?
 - (2) You can watch some people get distracted in ministry - especially when they start to gain recognition
 - (a) When I was at the conference in Texas, Matt Chandler told our small group that the elders of the church laid the ground work for his speaking engagements
 - (b) He said they gave him so many weekends a year he could be gone for conferences and speaking engagements
 - i) The reason is so he could be there to focus on the work God called him to in Texas - his church, not the Church
 - ii) And, to protect Matt and his family
 - (3) When you are convinced of the great work that God has for you, it is easier to say 'no' to lesser things that can get in the way

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- c) Nehemiah's third conviction is the Jews had nothing in common with Sanballat and company
 - (1) There was no basis for cooperation - it's oil and water
 - (2) Remember what Nehemiah said in chapter 2? Look at 2:20
 - (a) You have no share in Jerusalem
 - (b) Or any historic right
 - (c) That pretty much sums it up
 - (3) Which gives us a great look at what God has always intended for His people
 - (a) 2 Cor. 6:14-17
 - (b) Even today as believers we are to be different, separate from the world's way
 - i) That does not mean we are not out in the world - because what good is salt in the salt shaker?
 - (1) If we are the salt of the world like Jesus tells us
 - (2) We have to come into contact with that which can decay, or that which is frozen to do any good
 - ii) What it does mean is we do not enter into alliances or agreements with people who do not have the interests of God at heart
 - (1) That includes dating/marrying people that are not believers
 - (a) Admittedly this verse has been overused and abused toward that end
 - (b) The verse includes that relationship, but the verse is not excluded to that relationship
 - (2) Nehemiah is showing us another relationship of entering into an alliance with people that have done nothing but try to thwart God's plan
 - (3) Along that vain, I'll give you a practical example
 - (a) The trustees were approached about a year or more ago by a group that told us we could have a free roof
 - (b) We thought, "Great, someone doing a promotion for free advertising - what's not to like here"
 - (c) When we called the people they told us to get a free roof, all we had to do was claim hail damage to the insurance company
 - (d) Insurance usually pays more than what they would do the roof for, and voila, free roof with extra cash in the pocket

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- (e) Needless to say we said, thanks, but no thanks
 - 4. Finally, Nehemiah refused to be influenced by repeat offers
 - a) If their offer was bad the first time, it would be bad the second, or the fourth, or the fortieth
 - b) No need to reconsider
 - c) Which teaches us one more great lesson:
 - (1) A decision based on opinion may be reconsidered
 - (2) A decision based on conviction must stand, regardless of the consequences
- III. Sanballat tried slander - 6:5-9
- A. The fifth time Sanballat tries to approach Nehemiah, it is with a letter in hand
 - 1. The verse is specific, it is an unsealed letter - why is that important?
 - 2. Normally correspondence of that day was rolled up in a scroll and sealed so only the individual to whom it was intended could read the contents
 - 3. Being an open letter, everyone could read the contents
 - a) The contents were not even really new
 - b) Sanballat started with this same accusation in 2:19 - "Are you rebelling against the king"
 - 4. With an open letter, it may have been read in every town between Samaria and Jerusalem
 - a) So the very same people that are saying the rumors are out there
 - b) Are the ones spreading the rumors
 - B. Imagine what would happen if the workers began to suspect that Nehemiah was just using them for personal gain
 - 1. It could have stopped the work, fractured the unity, and caused all kinds of havoc
 - 2. It certainly would not have been good for Nehemiah's reputation
 - C. The letter was specific about Nehemiah's supposed plans
 - 1. He planned to be king
 - 2. And he already had prophets to help make him the king
 - D. Nehemiah's reaction again gives us lesson for life
 - 1. Nehemiah gave one reply, "It's not true, you are making this up."
 - a) He knew that they were just trying to scare the workers so they would stop working
 - 2. Then Nehemiah prayed again - a simple prayer to strengthen their hands as they work
 - 3. He denied the reports, prayed for God to strengthen, and went back to work
 - a) His character was up to the test

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- b) No person that knew Nehemiah would believe such nonsense
 - 4. Christian workers, Pastors, etc. often worry about moments like these
 - a) Someone making things up about them or their ministry
 - (1) I have had to face it
 - (2) As has every Christian worker in modern times
 - b) My solution, state that it is not true, and get back to the work God has for me
 - 5. Here is the reality: If you take care of your character, God will take care of your reputation (repeat)
 - a) Guard your character - that is who you are when no one is looking
 - (1) You are doing the right thing because it is the right thing
 - (2) In my case, I am not alone with students out of eye and ear shod
 - (3) Anyone would be welcome to look at my finances and tax returns to see I am being responsible with the resources God has given me
 - b) And your reputation will be handled by God
- IV. The final thing is enticing Nehemiah to sin - 6:10-14
- A. This is a harder one to pick out without some background from a commentary or a study Bible
 - 1. No context is really given
 - 2. This is why I encourage you to invest in a good study Bible
 - B. Nehemiah goes to the house of a prophet She mai ah
 - 1. Shemaiah is shut up in his house
 - a) Either he must be - by being an invalid, or by vow
 - b) Or, he is faking to lure Nehemiah there
 - 2. Shemaiah tells Nehemiah that they need to run to the temple because people are coming to kill him
 - a) The word used for temple suggests the inner sanctuary
 - b) The problem with this is twofold
 - c) First, only pagans went to the temple for protection
 - (1) In Jewish law, God set up cities of refuge for people to go to in need of protection
 - (2) A Jew would never run to the temple for protection
 - d) Second, and the reason a Jew would never run to the temple for protection is that by law no outsider could go into the inner parts of the temple
 - (1) Numbers 18:7 “But only you and your sons may serve as priests in connection with everything at the altar and inside the curtain. I am giving you the service of the priesthood as a gift. Anyone else who comes near the sanctuary is to be put to death.””

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- (2) So Nehemiah rejected this plan because it was contrary to the Law of Moses
- e) Again, Nehemiah gives us a great principle for us to live by
 - (1) God will never contradict Himself
 - (2) Because God will never contradict Himself, we should never
 - (a) Accept an interpretation of God's Word that we know contradicts another part of God's Word
 - (b) We should never accept advice, even from a fellow believer, that goes against God's revealed will
 - (c) We already have God's will in our hands
 - i) We don't go against the Bible
 - f) Nehemiah knew that Shemaiah was a false prophet for this very reason - he is trying to get him to go against the revealed will of God
- C. The other problem here is that Shemaiah is trying to tempt Nehemiah to put his safety ahead of the work God laid out for Him
 - 1. From what you know of Nehemiah so far, do you think that he would put personal safety above getting the job done?
 - 2. Especially when he hears that to save his skin means to break God's law?
 - 3. Of course not
- D. Nehemiah is realizing the plan, and basically tells them, "no way"
 - 1. I as a leader will not run
 - 2. Am I, a temple outsider, supposed to go and break God's law?
- E. Starting in verse 12 is how we know what was really taking place here
 - 1. Nehemiah realized God did not send Shemaiah, but that he was hired by his enemies
 - 2. The prophet telling him that people were after his life would be very intimidating
 - a) If you heard that from someone that was supposed to be a prophet, would you not be scared?
 - b) But Shemaiah tipped his hand too early with the issue of the temple
 - (1) Perhaps he was unaware of Jewish customs
 - (2) Or assumed the Jews were just like they were
 - (3) But Shemaiah was trying to get Nehemiah to sin by entering the temple
 - (4) Then Nehemiah would become discredited because of his sin
 - (a) People would no longer look up to Nehemiah
 - (b) The work would stop, and Sanballat would get what he hoped for.
- F. Finally, Nehemiah prays once again

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1. He asks God to remember his enemies for what they have done
 2. These men have been plotting to try to get the work of God to come to a stop
 - a) Nehemiah is asking God to remember their behavior
 - b) Basically to punish them
 - (1) Something to note - many people do not like these prayers in the Bible
 - (a) They are called imprecatory prayers or Psalms
 - (b) They ask for judgment on one's enemies
 - (2) I do want you to note something: who is going to do the punishment?
 - (a) God, right?
 - (b) We do not take matters into our hands
 - (c) The Bible reminds us several times that "vengeance is mine, says the Lord"
 - (3) Note something else: why does Nehemiah ask for the Lord to punish these people?
 - (a) They are trying to stop the work of God
 - (b) The prophets, who are supposed to pronounce God's will are accepting bribes to tell lies and entice people to sin
 - (c) These are not your average sins against a brother
 - c) And yet, Nehemiah returns to work, with only a simple prayer commending them into the hands of God to be dealt with as God sees fit
 - d) And that is what we have to do in life sometimes too
 - (1) We realize that there are evil people in the world
 - (2) We commend them into God's hands to do as God sees fit
 - (3) If we are able, we love them, and we guide them toward Christ
- V. Let me close with a few quick secrets to Nehemiah's success
- A. First, Nehemiah was close to God, and was a prayerful man
 - B. Second, Nehemiah had a calling to his task - He knew what God called him to, and would not lose sight of it
 - C. Nehemiah had incredible discernment
 1. In the middle of opposition from both outside and in
 2. With rumors flying
 3. With lies being told, Nehemiah was able to discern what the truth was, what the best path was, and how to react to each situation
 4. God gave him incredible skills and gifts - skills and gifts that you can develop as well