

NEHEMIAH 6

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Beloved congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ:

Introduction: We have seen how Nehemiah came from Persia to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and how the effort was blessed by the LORD. The wall is being built and it is nearing completion. We have, therefore, characterized Nehemiah as a true church builder.

Today, of course, the situation is different. Let us be reminded of this. We do not have to erect walls to protect God's people. Today the matter is *spiritual*. God Himself, as the prophet Zechariah proclaimed, is like a wall around us, and His Holy Spirit dwells within us. We have come much farther in the history of redemption. Still, also today the church of Christ must be built and completed, and therefore we may learn from what God has revealed in the work of His servant Nehemiah.

In chapter 6 we read how the wall is completed and even the gates are put in place. Then the work as such is finished. This does not mean, however, that Nehemiah's work itself is finished and that he can go back to Persia. For in the second part of the book the emphasis comes to fall on the *spiritual reformation* of Israel. It is one thing to live safely behind a solid wall. It is quite another matter how you live

behind that wall. So this spiritual restoration will need to follow the building of the wall itself. And we, as I said, have much to learn in this respect from the book of Nehemiah for our time. The physical situation may have changed, the spiritual struggle is the same, if not more intense.

In chapter 5, Nehemiah has explained how he had to deal with internal socio-economic problems. These problems were solved, and he could again devote himself fully to the finishing of the wall. But now the enemies, especially Sanballat and Tobiah, make one more concerted effort to prevent the completion of the wall. It is a determined and serious attempt. Satan will stop at nothing to halt the gathering and increase of Christ's church. Since the people of Israel are united and determined under Nehemiah's leadership, the enemies focus on Nehemiah himself. The attack is shrewd and subtle, calculated to entrap Nehemiah. Take him out, and the Jews will stop their rebuilding. Nehemiah comes to stand under severe pressure. And it is only through the LORD's grace and strength that he is able to stand firmly. Therefore our theme must be:

The LORD thwarts Satan's last attempts to prevent the completion of the wall of Jerusalem.

We will see two elements:

- 1. the typical manner of satanic resistance.**
- 2. the only manner of faithful perseverance.**

1. I speak of the "typical manner" of satanic resistance. Typical, because although the devil is a master of disguises and methods, at bottom he has only two options in his attack on the church of Christ. He can come as a roaring lion, openly hostile, seeking whom he can devour. He has tried that method already, as described in Nehemiah, chapter 2 and especially chapter 4. But that approach failed: the Jews built the wall with a trowel in one hand and a sword in the other. They posted guards and would not let themselves be overrun by a surprise attack.

The devil can also come as an angel of light. In this sense: he puts on a friendly face, expresses his concern over your well-being, and even tries to help you out of your many problems. Yes, there is a “hidden agenda,” but it is not always obvious. This second, seemingly sympathetic, method is perhaps more dangerous than the first one of outright confrontation.

The new tactic of Sanballat and Tobiah is typical: if you can fight ‘em, join ‘em. Let’s talk. Let us make a deal. There must be the possibility of compromise. The two enemies send a message to Nehemiah (verse 2): “Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono.” Nehemiah has in verse 1 already admitted that at this point the gates of the city were not yet in place; the city was still open and vulnerable. It is a moment when perhaps an armed conflict can as yet be prevented through bi-lateral consultation and agreement. Come, let us meet together.

Now Sanballat, the Samaritan governor, and Geshem, the Arab leader, do not propose any specific agenda for this meeting. At least Nehemiah does not mention it. But we may assume that it was designed to be seen as a gesture of good-will. Let’s talk. There is the unspoken invitation: perhaps we can come to a better understanding and even hammer out some form of cooperation. The enemies still do not want a Jewish state with a fortified capital city. But they now appear willing to negotiate.

Negotiate what? Well, there are the matters of political balance and access rights to Jewish territory, as well as trade, business and economic deals from which everyone, especially the leaders Sanballat, Geshem and Nehemiah, can benefit financially. Let us divide and rule. Some structure has to be put in place whereby especially Samaritans and Arabs do not feel threatened, and this matter needs discussion. Then armed conflict is unnecessary. Come, let us meet and enter into some kind of coalition, some form of peaceful co-existence. Dialogue is better than battle. Is it not so?

Dialogue and co-existence. It is *the* way of Satan. One commentator points here to the false ecumenical movement of the World Council of

Churches: all religions are equal, we agree to disagree but we will co-exist and cooperate, for all religions are basically the same. Let us not argue or fight, let us join together. At least, let us talk.

You would think that Nehemiah can hardly turn down such an agreeable offer. But he does. We'll see why in a few moments. This refusal, however, does not deter Sanballat and his partners. They keep trying. "Four times they sent me the *same message . . .*" (verse 4). This is meant to convince Nehemiah of their serious intentions. It is easy to refuse once, but to keep on refusing? Some of the Jewish leaders and nobles may well have disagreed with Nehemiah, feeling that he was blocking the way of peace.

Sanballat actually builds on that assumption. In verse 5 we read how he tries a different approach. The fifth time he sent an aide with the same (note that) message, but now there is an added twist: "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."

The actual request is still the same: come, let us meet together. But now certain intimidations are added. You want to rebel and become king. Sanballat does not say that this is true, but he presents it as a persistent rumour. Geshem the Arab has confirmed it also. And if word of a rebellion reaches the king of Persia – as it surely will – Nehemiah and the Jews are doomed!

I mentioned that this time the letter is unsealed. It is an open letter. This means that everyone may read it. It was probably read aloud by Sanballat's messenger to anyone who wanted to hear it. Now the matter is no longer a private negotiation; there is a public forum. Any time you go public, you involve others and attempt to influence the position of the people. Remember, some of the other leaders and maybe some of the people were concerned about Nehemiah's hard stance. Now they can

all hear where Nehemiah's refusal to talk may lead. As Sanballat goes public, Nehemiah's position is even more threatened. His enemies hope that Nehemiah's support base will shrink and that his own people will force him to go and talk.

Satan loves to spread rumours. No necessarily outright accusations, certainly not; he doesn't always directly attack your integrity and credibility, but makes subtle suggestions. "It is reported." You *must* come to prove to us that all these rumours are false. Defend yourself against this kind of talk, otherwise it will reach the king. Sanballat manages to give the impression that he is concerned about Nehemiah's well-being. He has Nehemiah's best interests at heart. It's all above board, so to speak. Now everyone is looking at Nehemiah to see what he will do and many will advise him: you must go and prove that all this is false.

Spreading rumours, even under the pretence of not really believing them, is truly a satanic approach. It is sin against the ninth commandment. Satan's favourite sin, for, as the Lord Jesus said, he is a liar and the father of lies. How many times has he not sought to discredit the position of the Christian church and its members? How many times have Christians not wrongly been called to public account for things they never intended or did? This process still goes on today. And how much damage has rumour-spreading not done inside the church? We pass something on, make it public, even though we know that it is not as we have heard.

Notice how Satan tightens the noose. But again, Nehemiah is unimpressed. He dismisses them curtly: you are just making this up out of your head! Then comes the final attempt. We read about it in the verses 10 to 13. Since Nehemiah cannot be approached from the outside, Satan seeks to influence him from the inside. Nehemiah tells us how one day he went to visit a man called Shemaiah. This fellow is a bit of a mystery, really. Since Nehemiah went to visit him, he must have been a man of some influence in Jerusalem, perhaps a priest who was also recognized as having prophetic gifts. A man to be reckoned with and listened to. It says in the NIV that Shemaiah was "shut in at

his home" (verse 10). Some translate this differently, "shut in" in the sense of "bought and paid for," meaning he was a secret informer for Tobiah and Sanballat. He may even have been related to Tobiah, Nehemiah's enemy. Some explainers suggest that the "shutting in" indicates that Shemaiah stayed in his house to create the impression that he, too, was in danger of his life. So he would dearly love to speak to the governor, Nehemiah, about the situation.

Nehemiah goes to speak with him. Shemaiah indicates that he has inside information about a conspiracy to kill Nehemiah: they are coming to kill you by night. His solution is: let us (notice the "us", because it suggests a common need and danger) meet in the house of God (the temple) and close the temple doors. Let's seek asylum in the temple, and he means: the holy area, where no one would dare to tread. You are safe, Nehemiah, only in the inner sanctuary of the temple.

Now anyone who was informed about an immediate secret plot against his life would panic and indeed seek sanctuary somewhere. He would accept the help of trusted men in Israel. Again, however, Nehemiah does not fall into the trap. The reason is simple: Shemaiah is telling him to do something that is forbidden by God. Only priests may enter the sanctuary, and only under certain conditions, but Nehemiah was no priest. You can not save yourself by breaking the law of God! Sin is no solution for safety. That alone was enough to warn Nehemiah of ulterior motives. In the temple, behind closed doors, he could easily be assassinated. Do you think that Sanballat and Tobiah would respect the sanctity of God's house? Nehemiah understood: the man has been hired to intimidate me, not only he but also other prophets and behind all this stand Sanballat and Tobiah (verse 14).

It seems that everyone is out to protect Nehemiah, but he sees through all these false pretences. At the same time, he knows that his position is precarious and his life is indeed in great danger. It seems that there is no way out. He is cornered; he can be killed at any moment. Satan has put Nehemiah into an isolated position, and there is no one he can really trust. If even his fellow leaders in Judah are bought by the enemy, what hope is there?

Now this situation is not unique. An attack on God's people is often a direct attack on their leaders. The method is simple, typical, and consistent: bring them to confusion and fear, to a sense of futility; get them isolated. This is true for all God's children: the devil tries to manoeuvre us into a position in which we see no reasonable way out. Then some form of despair set in. We may take measures to regain control of our lives, but nothing seems to work; everything is in a downward spiral. We lose our focus and things become fuzzy. Perhaps we isolate ourselves even more, because we trust no one or feel that no one will understand our situation. People we once trusted have become alien to us. And as leaders or members of God's people we cease to be productive in the church building process. We finally give in. Satan has worn us down.

That's Satan's goal. He works things so that you are no longer a functioning and living member of the church of Christ. You are hemmed in and side-lined. That Nehemiah does not fall for these deceptions is not his own doing. We will see how he stands despite himself. The LORD keeps him standing. For we are here directed to Christ, who knows Satan better than anyone, who faced all these temptations and deceptions and never once wavered in His commitment to God's glory and God's people. He came Himself to defeat the devil, to unmask the lies by the Truth. And when He was finally betrayed, deserted, and condemned, He continued to trust in the heavenly Father, because He knew: my way is right before God. Yes, who knows Satan better than Christ. We should take comfort in that. For who knows better what we need against Satan than Christ? He alone can enable us to persevere in faith.

2. I want to devote a few words to what we read about Nehemiah's faithful perseverance. He doesn't accept the invitation to go to the plain of Ono for consultation with Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem. The "plains of Ono" may have been chosen because this could be seen as "neutral territory"; Jews and heathen co-existed there peacefully. But Nehemiah smells a rat and senses a trap. He knows to what length the

enemies will go to prevent the building of the walls. But notice, he doesn't accuse them of any evil intent. Counter-accusations (even with evidence) are useless. He simply says: I am too busy! I am working on a great project – assigned by God – and I have no time and opportunity to come for a conference. This work comes first! It is a setting of priorities for oneself.

Indeed, never mind the motives and plans of others. We have our own priorities in the kingdom of heaven. Instead of engaging in insulting others, simply say: I am involved in the work of the LORD. The world does not dictate the terms, the LORD does. Sanballat and Tobiah can come to Jerusalem to talk if they wish, but Nehemiah has no time to tiptoe through the countryside. Sorry, God's work comes first!

Set priorities and remain focused. Do not accept a worldly dilemma. Do not let the secular scheme of things determine your personal agenda! Nehemiah is not boasting when he says, "I am doing a great work." He's simply indicating: this is my first responsibility. God's work is great (important) and comes first. I must focus on what God has called me to do and be, and the rest is really of little or no importance.

And then others may take the matter further by a public smear-campaign or seek to influence you through others, but you just keep doing what you are doing. The response to the "open letter" is brief and to the point. Don't be intimidated. They can say all kinds of evil things about you – but who can defend himself against rumours? You can only outlast a rumour by continuing to do what is right. The Bible tells us plainly (Ecclesiastes): do not pay attention to all the things people say about you; just keep doing the right thing, and the rumours will be proven wrong and will disappear. We can sometimes spend so much time defending ourselves that we hardly get around to the LORD's work. Let the LORD Himself vindicate us. In that faith continue to do what He has called you to do. Christians who are so worried about their reputation will easily be distracted from their real task.

Indeed, the more we worry about what others say, the less we do. Nehemiah figured that out pretty quickly, verse 9: "They were all trying

to frighten us, thinking, "Their hands will get too weak for the work, and it will not be completed." Remember: Satan is trying to keep you from your Christian work. And there are many things which can distract us from our real purpose and calling in life. Ask yourself constantly: what is my real task here? What am I supposed to be doing? What has God *revealed*? Don't worry so much about what others say and plan, but focus on what God has said and determined.

And if there is a time of anxiety and fear, seek your comfort in prayer. Verse 9 (end): "But I prayed, now strengthen my hands." Here we have again one of those sudden prayers which so characterized Nehemiah's life and ministry. Do not for one moment think that he was some kind of super-man who stoically and dispassionately went his way. He knew of fear and anxiety. When the open letter came, Nehemiah was upset, dismayed. Did he throw a tantrum? Break the furniture? Mouth off his servants? Get angry with God? No, he fell on his knees. He said: Now strengthen my hands. Now! This I cannot handle on my own. There is an urgency in this spontaneous prayer: LORD, always but especially right now, I need your help, in this specific situation! The open letter leads to a sudden intensifying of personal prayer.

Prayer is always required in the Christian life, but especially when there are times of tension and adversity. Now – in this concrete need – strengthen my hands. Not: LORD, will you please solve all my problems for me, but: LORD, help me now to do the right thing! I know what to do, but give me the strength! This is the style of Nehemiah, because this is the style of his Lord, the great church builder, Jesus Christ. He was Son of God, even in the flesh, but when pressed and surrounded by enemies, even from his own circle of disciples, He trusted in God, and he prayed. How Jesus prayed! Father, strengthen my hands. Church builders follow Him also in this respect. We live and work in complete dependency and trust in God, or we become unproductive. Church building, kingdom promotion, at home, in public, you can only do it in the strength of the LORD.

And then it is remarkable what can be done. It is amazing how God indeed guides you and what insights He gives you. Nehemiah did not

know right away that Shemaiah was one of the conspirators. But when Shemaiah came up with that plan to run and hide in the temple, Nehemiah realized whom he was dealing with. Verse 12: "I realized that God had not sent him . . ." Nehemiah knew that God's servants do not give advice contrary to God's Word. God's prophets do not legislate out of fear but out of faith.

He said to Shemaiah: Should such a man like me run away? A man like me: if the *shepherds* desert the flock, where shall the sheep go? Do I have to run and hide in the temple to save my life? Shall I force God's hand? No, Shemaiah: God is all around me, and I am always safe in His care. If I hide in the temple, that would not only discredit me, but be against God's command. It would insult the LORD. I shall stand in the strength of the LORD, openly and publicly, come what may.

Well, the Jewish nobles who were afraid of this hard-line stance kept communicating with the enemies (verses 17 – 19). They kept trying to influence Nehemiah by telling him about the good deeds and noble intentions of Tobiah. Meanwhile they reported to Tobiah every word Nehemiah said. What a situation in which to work! Who can keep up this kind of work?

Nehemiah suffered under it, witness his prayer recorded in verse 14: "Remember Tobiah and Sanballat and also those in Jerusalem who have tried to intimidate me." Please, LORD, you deal with them and vindicate your cause and your name. No thoughts of personal revenge are allowed, no personal vendettas needed, the LORD will vindicate His children who persevere faithfully.

And the miracle? There is a miracle here, you know. Humanly speaking, the wall and gates never would have been finished. The odds against it were too great. But Nehemiah may report (verses 15 and 16): "So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days." The work is completed, even in record time. God's people can do a lot of work when they do it in God's strength, in persevering faith. And they experience the results not as their work, but as a miracle of God.

Why? Because the work had been done with the help of our God. This is the bottom line. Building the church in our time is our responsibility. God lays this task upon us. But we do it with His help. That's why the job gets done. After all, it is not our church, but Christ's church. He is the founder and finisher of it all. What we did, we did through Him. So the glory goes to God, even for the effort we put forth.

That's the Christian life in a nutshell. Hard work. Focused. Prioritized. Persevering in faith. In humble prayer, always. For He builds through the effort of His children. His strength becomes evident in the weakness of His people. Why? That He might in Christ receive *all the glory*.

Thy help has made me glorious and great;
I did not slip; my path was wide and straight (Psalm 18 : 11).

Thy Help.

Thy glory.

The miracle is still happening today.

AMEN.