

All right. Let's open our Bibles this morning to Nehemiah 6.

In 606 B.C., the LORD allowed the southern kingdom of Judah to go into captivity to the Babylonians because He had been warning them for hundreds of years of their idolatry and how that this kind of a life would bring captivity. And it did. The LORD wanted to teach His people that idolatry was no place to be for them. God didn't want any gods before Him. But He had told them that, for seventy years, they would be held in captivity; even named the guy, Cyrus, who would let them go back to Jerusalem. He is mentioned in Isaiah 44 and 45, 150 years before he was ever born. When the Medo-Persian Empire overthrew the Babylonians, he was the first king, and he said to the Jews, "You can go home," and about 50,000 of them did - led by a fellow named Zerubbabel, another fellow named Joshua. Eighty years later, Ezra would take 2,000 more folks out of Babylon back to Jerusalem. Twelve years later Nehemiah would be the guy that we meet. And Nehemiah was a young guy that had never really seen Jerusalem, but God put it upon his heart to be concerned about their welfare. The wall around the city, which had been taken down so many years before, had never been rebuilt. The pilgrims there were constantly exposed to danger and hardship.

And so the first part of the book, which we will finish this morning, is about God moving a man and then moving a people to accomplish what He wanted - getting this wall built and respect and safety being returned to the city, to God's people, to the place that He had put His name. And we get a lot of these little short chapters about Nehemiah, the builder and the governor and the overseer. But when he had gotten his vision (back in chapter 1) and eight months later found himself in Jerusalem for the first time through God's good hand, he asked the LORD for direction, shared the vision with the people, and then they began to build. And with every stone into the wall, more opposition rose up. And so we've looked at that in chapters 3 and 4 and 5. In fact, we ended two weeks ago with Satan seeking to divide from within because nothing without, even threats, had slowed down the work. The people had a mind to work; they were praying, and they were watching. And last week, we looked at the last five or six verses of chapter 5 as Nehemiah wanted to distance himself from the folks in the body that were serving

themselves at the expense of others - how the enemy had turned, really, God's people against each other.

Well, this morning we get to chapter 6, and we come to the end of the wall building. In fact, next week the focus will turn from building the wall to building the spiritual lives of the people, and Nehemiah will kind of go into the background, and Ezra will kind of come to the foreground. But before that, we have this last chapter to deal with, and it's an interesting picture because even to the very end, while things are almost finished, the enemy is not resting in terms of opposition. Up to this point, everything he has thrown at God's people has not worked. Mockery didn't work, threats didn't work, even internal strife hadn't worked. So, one last ploy - he's going after Nehemiah personally and seeking to put him in the direct line of attack, trying to stop the work from the top, if you will. And so Nehemiah's about to get a blast from hell. Jesus said (Luke 19:17), "If you're faithful in the little, God will give you much," and that's good, but with much also comes difficulty. So here's the man of faith having to walk with faith.

We've mentioned before, and I guess it bears repeating, that oftentimes when we talk about faith, people associate it to getting. "I trusted the LORD, and this is what I got. I prayed, and this is what He gave me." But, in reality, the faith that God is most pleased with is the faith that hangs in with Him before the answer is seen. I think it was Paul who said to the Romans (8:24), "Why do you need to have hope if what you are hoping for you have?" In other words, faith is only faith until you receive what you're waiting upon. And so, that's really the wrong connection. Right? God is most interested in how you wait upon Him before you get what you're praying for, before God brings into your life what you've been seeking Him for. You don't need faith anymore once you get what you're waiting for. And so the climax of this first part of the book is not verse 15, where the wall is finished, but it is the faith of Nehemiah and the people to continue to do what God has said even when things look pretty difficult. It's kind of like Noah. His faith is exemplary in the fact that he built for 120 years without a cloud in the sky. And Abraham's faith was exemplary when he wandered for years through a land that God said he would have, but everyone was living in it, and He wasn't, really. Or Jeremiah, who preaches for fifty years to a people that won't listen and are so hardened that he has to write their exodus into captivity, and he feels like, "Gosh, have I really accomplished anything at all?" Faith is that waiting upon God, and it's a process, and it's slow, and it's difficult. "The testing of our faith works patience," James (1:3) said.

So, verse 1 tells us, "Now it happened when Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab, and the rest of our enemies heard that I had rebuilt the wall, and that there were no breaks left in it (though at that time I had not hung the doors in the gates), that Sanballat and Geshem sent to me saying, 'Come, let us meet together among the villages in the plain of Ono.' But they thought to do me harm." On the heels of a ribbon-cutting ceremony, here's the enemy's last-ditch effort to derail Nehemiah. But they're coming after him, now, directly. Know this - the enemy never rests. And when you think you're just getting over the top of things, your victory is sure, be careful. David fell with Bathsheba at a time when he had never lost, militarily, a battle. He was kickin' back at home, and he was satisfied, and God had blessed. Joseph was tempted by Mrs. Potiphar right after he had been promoted by Mr. Potiphar to take care of the entire household. He'd been trusted, and that's when the temptation came. Jesus is baptized and begins His earthly ministry. But before He does, there's the enemy to try to tempt Him. Same thing with the disciples up on the Mount of Transfiguration. They see the Lord glorified, but at the bottom waited the devil. There's a lot to be said for mountain top experiences are often followed by valley experiences.

So, notice that, as the wall is just about done - they've just got to hang the gates, the enemy changes his tactics entirely. He resurfaces with these words, "Let's be friends. Let's meet in the plains of Ono." It's about twenty-five miles or so to the northwest. "Let's mend our differences." I think if you were alive during those days, you might say to Nehemiah, "Oh, good. Finally. They realize this is God's work, and God would like us to forgive and to restore." And some probably felt like Nehemiah was too callous in what he was going to respond to and obviously what sounds like a humble invitation. But here his spiritual antenna is up. He senses trouble. To have this meeting, it would mean stopping the work for a time, and, man, they were on a roll, and he doesn't do that. And besides, they wanted to meet in the plains of "Oh, no." So that oughta (Laughing) tell you somethin'. That was a tipoff.

Well, here's plan A - "Won't you be my neighbor?" Verse 3, "So I sent messengers to them, saying, 'I'm doing a great work, so that I cannot come down. Why should the work cease while I leave it and go down to you?' But they sent me this message four times, and I answered them in the same manner." Can you imagine the Jerusalem Post, in the morning, saying, "Governor snubs invitation to summit conference on Middle East peace"? That sounds like a headline, doesn't it? "Come on, Nehemiah, loosen up! The wall is finished anyway. We can hang doors without

your help." And Nehemiah says, "No." I think we should learn from Nehemiah that the enemy is sometimes very subtle; and sometimes the subtlety is just to interrupt what God is doing in your life for something that seems very innocuous. In other words, he'll stop you from going in the direction that God wants you to go with a distraction that isn't at all, in and of itself, maybe, a problem. But because of when it comes and from whom it comes, it turns your head aside, and it's a side issue, but it keeps you away from what God wants. I guess you could write over verses 3 and 4, "Priorities, if you keep them, will keep you from the enemy's deception." Keep your priorities straight. Don't compromise them for the sake of somehow moving forward. I love Nehemiah's words. "I'm doing a great work. I can't come down." Why do you think this city had existed for all of this time without a wall? And the answer is pretty simple. People were distracted year in and year out - served themselves, had other things in mind. Ask yourself this - how many years have you been vowing to make changes in your walk with the Lord? And have you made them? Or are they just still on the paper? These are "to do" lists. You know? Right here. The enemy will come time and time again to stop progress simply by getting you distracted; because that's really what this was - it was a distraction. James writes, in chapter 4:7, "Submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you." Two steps: you submit to the Lord, and then you resist the enemy; and, as a result, you're free from his temptations.

Notice that they've sent this letter four different times, hand-delivered by courier. They were persistent. They sought to slow things down. They outwardly and publicly seem to be very kind and willing. They tried to paint Nehemiah as the bad guy, "He'll never forgive. He's got a chip on his shoulder." But in the end, after these four times (don't know how long it took), their intentions became clear. Because, if plan A doesn't work ("Won't you be my neighbor?") - if at first you don't succeed, change things a little bit.

And, in verse 5, they do. "Then Sanballat sent his servant to me as before, the fifth time, with an open letter in his hand." So everyone could hear. This one was published in the paper. "In it was written: 'It is reported among the nations, and Geshem says, that you and the Jews plan to rebel; therefore, according to these rumors, you are rebuilding the wall, that you may be their king. And you have also appointed prophets to proclaim concerning you at Jerusalem, saying, "There is a king in Judah!" Now these matters will be reported to the king. So come, therefore, and let us consult together.' " Gosh, they were so nice before. And now comes this fifth letter, and it's an open letter, and you can see that the kindness is

wearing thin, and their hearts are truly exposed. Nehemiah was right about them. But look at the slander, "We plan on exposing you and your evil motive of rebellion. You want an overthrow. You want to be the king of this place. You've hired false prophets to run around and say, 'Nehemiah's going to be the king.'" And then they say, at the end, "Are you sure you don't want to meet? Maybe we should just talk about this. We can avoid this whole ugly mess if you just come meet with us." The problem is everything they were saying was just outright lies. None of it was true. This was the rumor mill from hell. If Satan can't get you with kindness, careful that he doesn't seek to get you with gossip and lies. When Paul wrote to the Ephesians in chapter 4:29, he said, "Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers." And that really is a preventative measure from the Lord to the church so that we don't become Satan's little pawns in this whole deal of gossip and destruction.

Notice, in verse 6, that rumors and lies rarely have a source. Here's how they usually work - "Well, we've heard.....somebody said....." "Who?" "I don't know. But we know a guy that heard it." They're unnamed sources. They're quoted by someone else. They are rumors that are misleading and seek to do damage, and they're hard to rectify because they're gossip. It's the lawyer in court who says what he knows won't get by the judge, but the jury will have heard it. "I withdraw the question or the statement. But I've said it already." I remember years ago hearing the story of a fellow who had been slandered by his neighbor for weeks and months in a town, and the neighbor finally said, "I want you to forgive me all that I've said about you behind your back and to others." And the neighbor said, "Well, go home and get your feather pillow. Cut a hole in it, and bring it to me." And he brought it to him, but by the time he got there, he said, "Where are all the feathers?" He said, "They're blowing all over town." He said, "That's what you've done! You just talked and talked, and once it goes out of your mouth, it's hard to retrieve the words." And so gossip is a pretty effective tool in the enemy's hands because you can't reel it in. It goes out, you can't pull it back. And it so happens when you speak lies or gossip, whether they're true or not, it doesn't matter; you can't bring it back.

So Nehemiah's in a pretty tough place. Think about his position here. On the one hand, to stop the work, he'd have to go meet with these folks, but he realizes that the enemy is wicked, and he has destruction in mind. To meet with him, he would have to disobey the LORD. But to not go now to meet with him, would mean that all

of these vicious lies and innuendo and unanswered accusations, he would risk the fact that he might very well have people believing those things. And if it got back to the king, maybe the king would knock the wall down, stop the whole thing. A real possibility. So what does he do?

Well here's some sound advice from Nehemiah in verses 8 and 9. And if you've ever been the subject of ridicule, and you feel like you have to defend yourself at every turn, then listen to him. Because Nehemiah is pretty wise. We read, in verse 8, "Then I sent to him, saying, 'No such things as you say are being done, but you invent them in your own heart.' For they all were trying to make us afraid, saying, 'Their hands will be weakened in the work, and it will not be done.' Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands." A couple of things. Nehemiah says to the accusations, "It's a lie. It's just a lie. You guys are lying." But notice, in verse 9, it scared Nehemiah. It frightened him. The next time you expect more from yourself, be encouraged. Here's a guy that you can look up to that had a hard time with accusations as well. He'd been a model believer. He'd done all of the things correctly. There wasn't any place in his life that you could put your finger upon. And yet, somehow, here's the enemy making stuff up, and Nehemiah is at risk. "If the king believes it, if the people turn, if the wall gets taken down, if I get arrested or worse, what's going to take place?" So, outwardly Nehemiah is hanging in there pretty toughly; inwardly, he's crying out. Notice, at the end of verse 9, "O God, strengthen my hands. God, You handle this. You take care of this." Sweaty palms, racing heart, and a body that seems to be lagging behind in faith. David wrote (in the Psalm that we read this morning), "For I hear the slander of many; fear is on every side; while they take counsel together against me, they scheme to take away my life. But as for me, I trust in You, O LORD" (Psalm 31:13-14). It's an interesting way that you respond to what you might hear because, so often, our response to when people say things about us that aren't true or aren't fair, we want to deal with it directly. And what does that do? It takes you back to the chapter - it distracts you from what you're doing. Right? It changes your priority.

So, Nehemiah is pretty clear. He denies the slander with a firm denial, asks for God to be his defense. What do you do when you're in that kind of a position? And it happens. We live amongst people that are wicked, don't we? It's just the way life is when sin rules. Do we try to fight fire with fire? Do we try to clear the air or set the record straight? Or do we find others who are our friends so we can gather together with folks who are on our side, and we're against their side kind of thing? Is it one of those kinds of stand-offs? I read one time that our feet never

run quicker than when we run to our own defense. But Nehemiah didn't do that. He was willing to deny the accusations, but then he just went back to serving the LORD because anything else the priorities change, and the work stops. When I was a young pastor, and we used to go to Costa Mesa and meet with Pastor Chuck on Thursday mornings, he said to us one time (in one of our meetings, as he was talking about people criticizing you - especially if you're in a ministry), "You are not a fireman, called to go put out fires. You're a pastor. You go tell people about Jesus. And that's all you should be concerned about."

I mentioned a few weeks ago that in ministry you always hear criticism. We actually had somebody write on the radio that said they didn't like the music that was the intro. "Could you just change that?" And I thought, "Really? That's why you bothered to write?" So we turned it up louder. (Laughing) It's an interesting thing that people seem to feel like they're comfortable about criticizing. I think I probably told you this story. But I had a lady, maybe twenty-five years ago, sitting in the front row. And we used to wear suits. I used to have long hair, too. Lots of things we used to do. (Laughing) But she came up after the service and said, "That's the worst lookin' tie I've ever seen." So, being a wicked guy, I did this. I put my head down and said, "I'm sorry. This is the tie my dad gave me before he died." (Laughing) Then her eyes got real "Sorry," and she ran off. My dad didn't give it to me, but I was just (Laughing) I'm just telling you now. I think she's no longer with us, so she's forgiven me in heaven.

Criticisms. And it is easy to lose respect for the backbiter and the gossiper. Don't think we don't hear it. We do hear it. But I like Nehemiah's approach, and I try to follow it. "Lord, take care of it!" I don't have time to go chase all that kind of stuff down. Satan wants to distract us from the work. Chasing down people that don't like you - full time job. Or you can just serve the Lord. And God called Nehemiah to build not put out fires. I was thinking if Jesus had spent His entire ministry hunting down name-callers, boy, He'd have never gotten done. So you get to Romans 12:19, and the Lord said to us, "Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord. Therefore, 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink.' " "I'll deal with the consequences." Boy, that's liberating isn't it? And it will keep you from getting bitter and angry. I think when Paul wrote the 1 Corinthians letter (in chapter 4:3), he said to them, "But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court" (and there were plenty of people in Corinth that didn't like Paul). And then he says, "In fact, I do not even

judge myself. For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord. Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one's praise will come from God." "I'll just wait till God cleans it up and brings the judgment."

So, Nehemiah is a pretty good example of denial and, then, let God fight your battles, and let Him protect your integrity, and let Him continue the work. And here's the enemy - last-ditch effort to stop the work. And he's not able to do it.

Verse 10, "Afterward I came to the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, the son of Mehetabel, who was a secret informer;" (you go ahead and mention those) "and 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; indeed, at night they will come to kill you.' And I said, 'Should such a man as I flee? And who is there such as I who would go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in!' Then I perceived that God had not sent him at all, but that he pronounced this prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. For this reason he was hired, that I should be afraid and act that way and sin, so that they might have cause for an evil report, that they might reproach me. My God, remember Tobiah and Sanballat, according to these their works, and the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who would have made me afraid." Plan 3 - let's make it spiritual. Pretense of friendship hadn't worked. Slander didn't seem to get anywhere either. "How 'bout we send a wolf in sheep's clothing and use a spiritual ruse to get Nehemiah into a place of criticism?" Satan is far more dangerous as an angel of light than a roaring lion. I think if he appears to you and says, "Hi, I'm the devil, I want to ruin your life," you'll run. But if he shows up as an angel of light And this fellow, Shemaiah, in the guise of a prophet, came to Nehemiah with this, "Thus saith the LORD." Right? In other words, he's involving God now, and he's on the enemy's payroll, but he's using spiritual tactics to try to undermine the work. His words to Nehemiah, "You better go hide in the temple. You better run for your life. You better save your neck because they're planning to kill you! They're planning to come at night. The best thing you can do is hide yourself in a place that they can't access you. And the LORD, by the way, told me to tell you that." We've had people that call the church sometimes, even had folks come up to me and say, "You know, I was praying for you, and here's what the Lord told me to tell you," and it's usually something that they're more interested in than I am. And my usual response, over the years, has come to be, "Well, if the Lord wants me to know that,

have Him call me. Because He's got my number. I'm in the book.....at least in His book."

So, that's kind of what's happening here. Satan is at work through feigned inspiration and religious kind of phoniness. And, again, verse 11 - awesome response. Nehemiah said, "I can't run. I'm a godly man, I'm a leader. I'm a fellow that God has been using. The people look up to me. I can't run. My behavior would impact lots of people. And this is a lie." Fear can certainly drive you to do irrational things. Abraham - lying about his wife, Sarah. David - standing before Achish in Gath, acting like he'd lost his mind. Fear is always faith's enemy. But notice that Nehemiah is just not moved. "Should such a man as I flee? I'm God's child. I can't run and hide. I won't budge. I'm not leaving, even if it costs me my life," verse 14, "I'm not going anywhere. I'm going to leave it with the LORD and let Him do what He wants to do." And, again, over time, and it doesn't seem like something that Nehemiah understood right away, but he realized this was, again, another attack of the enemy.

Well finally, in the midst of all of that, verse 15, "So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of Elul, in fifty-two days. And it happened, when all our enemies heard of it, and all the nations around us saw these things, that they were very disheartened in their own eyes; for they perceived that this work was done by our God. Also in those days the nobles of Judah sent many letters to Tobiah, and the letters of Tobiah came to them. For many in Judah were pledged to him, because he was the son-in-law of Shechaniah the son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah. Also they reported his good deeds before me, and reported my words to him. Tobiah sent letters to frighten me." In the midst of the onslaught, the work is finished in fifty-two days - just a little over six weeks. That's humanly impossible. I mean, if you go look at even the walls of Jerusalem in those days (and it wasn't as large as they are, obviously, today), it was a tremendous miracle. For 160 years, there'd been no wall, and now it stands in six weeks; and it provides God's honor and the people's protection. And I love verse 16 because all of that faithfulness and trust in the LORD, whether they admitted it or not, the enemies of God saw that God was at work. They had to stand in awe of the LORD that was being served by Nehemiah and the people. Satan is defeated. They even recognize it to be so, that they have been defeated. Paul would write to the Philippians (1:12), "The things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel." He'd been maligned and imprisoned and talked about; and yet he said, "The Lord is

working." "I'm going to stay unmoving," he writes to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 15:58). So, thank God He does not call us to initiate programs but just to be faithful to Him, to not be discouraged, to not give up. And verses 15 and 16, the wall is built, and the enemy realizes God was at work. That's what we want to see. You can "sow in tears, but you can reap in joy" (Psalm 126:5). And they did. And they did.

I think that one of the things that this book tells us (at least to verse 16 of this chapter) is that the enemy's greatest word to you would be, "Don't do it" or "Stop doing it." Whatever God has given you, he wants you to stop. Right? Stop goin' to church, stop readin' your Bible, stop praying, stop forgiving, stop being merciful, stop reaching out. Just stop. Because whatever it takes. And he's tried everything. But if you'll stay with what God has given you and the enemy would say, "Don't do it," but the lesson of Nehemiah is - sow it every time, sow at every step. We tell people all the time, "Hey, if you start goin' to church and readin' your Bible, and stick with it for six months, your life will change. God's Word will get in. There'll be marked progress that you'll be making." But the other is also true. If you stop reading your Bible, stop getting in fellowship, stop serving the Lord, six months from now you could fall apart. Because it's our life.

And so, I think that the lesson from Nehemiah is stick with what God has given you. Keep your eyes upon Him. And all that you can go through - chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5 - all the stuff that was intended to stop him, nothing could, and nothing did.

We end in verses 17, 18 and 19, though, with some disheartening news and that is, though the wall is complete, the enemy is not going away. And this fellow Tobiah - who has been with us since the beginning, a real thorn in the side of the work of God, even amongst the Jews there in town - had a great following. And the reason is both he and his son had married Jewish women. So the enemy was now living in the camp. Those in the church, if you will, married to Satan, appearing to be sheep. And so this relationship between Tobiah and the Jews, the inner track if you will; in fact, you will find them, after a while, building a little place in the temple for him to live, if you can imagine. It will continue to the end of the book. There's always the enemy. Now he'll try to infiltrate and pull alongside.

Nehemiah teaches us the necessity of pressing on through every trial, to just standing strong. We only read nineteen verses, but in nineteen verses Nehemiah's given an offer of phony friendship from the enemy. He says, "I'm too busy doing

the work of God. I don't have time for that." He was faced with slander. They called Jesus a winebibber, a glutton, a friend of sinners, born out of wedlock, questionable motives. You can make a list of all that they said to Jesus. And yet Peter writes of Jesus (1 Peter 2:23), when they mocked him or "when they sought to revile him, He didn't respond in kind; He just committed Himself to the Father." He was faced with phony religious insight from a "thus saith the LORD" guy. He responded, "I can't run. I'm God's man. I can't go anywhere. If this is what God wants, great. But I'm not running. I'm busy doing the work." Jesus refused Satan's offer as an easy way in the wilderness as well. And then he ultimately faces the intimidation and the infiltration and the betrayal of those around him. And yet he's still pluggin' along. Pretty good book, and we're only halfway done. At least the wall is up - we can get on to somethin' else.

Next week we'd like to look at, with you, some personal steps for revival - what you can do personally to strengthen your walk with God. But here's the problem - the people that were with Nehemiah, as much as they'd been encouraged by him, had a long way to go to be spiritually strong. They had a good influence. They had a good overseer. But there were lots of things that they needed to change if God was going to work in their lives in the long term. So next week we'll just give you a list of things out of chapter 7, and there're just a lot of names in there as well, but we're going to pick and choose here what the Lord might teach us next week. We'll go from wall building to life building.

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
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