

Nehemiah 6 – Stopping God’s Work

Hook (1005-1007) –

Attack the Leader	How People Try to Block the Work of God, and What to Do About It	Enlist Higher Authorities
Separate the Leader from the People		Attack the People

Book (1007-1010) – Nehemiah 6:1-19

Look (1010-1040)

Attack the Leader

V1 – Zerubabel and the Jews that returned from Babylon had rebuilt the Temple in about 515 BC, and much of the city of Jerusalem had been restored. Nonetheless, in the days of sword, spear, bow and arrow, a city wall was needed to keep the place safe. The enemies of Israel continually tried to take advantage of the Jews’ weakness and so were displeased when Nehemiah and his cohort arrived in Palestine (around 445 BC) to finish the rebuilding of the city and, more importantly, the walls. Nehemiah and his workers’ had raised the wall from almost nothing in only a few weeks, but they had not yet added the gates and some of the key defenses.

Sensing that their opportunity to harass and intimidate the Jews was quickly passing, Sanballat, Tobiah and Geschem the Arab tried one last time to stop their progress.

V2 – Nehemiah is writing in the first person, and so when he was invited to go to Ono, near Lod (Lydda) in the Plain of Sharon, he suspected an assassination plot.

V3 – Rather than going himself, Nehemiah sent representatives to answer for him. He sent several together to ensure that they would send the message accurately and for their own security. His reason for refusing was firm but diplomatic. Rather than accusing Sanballat, Tobiah and Geschem the Arab outright of conspiracy, Nehemiah protested that he simply did not have time to meet; his task in Jerusalem was paramount. This would have offended his enemies, as diplomatic meetings were considered the highest priority, but not as much as accusing them. Had he been wrong, Nehemiah would have diminished his own credibility and left him open to censure from the Persian king Artaxerxes I.

V4 - Sanballat, Tobiah and Geschem the Arab tried repeatedly, hoping to wear down Nehemiah’s will and get him to come. It seemed like a reasonable request, and perhaps even some of his supporters were bewildered by his refusal to even talk to his enemies. After all, the Bible contains no proof that they were trying to kill Nehemiah; it only says that Nehemiah suspected it.

Illustration –

Discussion Questions/Application

How have enemies opposed you in doing the work of God? How have you opposed others doing it?

Enlist Higher Authorities

VV 5-7 – Unable to threaten the person of Nehemiah, the enemies tried to threaten his work by lies and innuendo to Artaxerxes I. Rebellion was always a threat, and the Jews were notorious for their repeated revolts against Babylon. They would prove this intransigency later against the Greeks and the Romans until their state was finally obliterated after the revolt of 66 AD. Artaxerxes (464-424 BC) was well acquainted with rebellion. His reign began when the captain of the guard Artabanus murdered his father and brother,

and then Artaxerxes killed the murderer. He faced a combined revolt from Egypt and Greece (460-454 BC) which was hard to crush.

Sanballat was clever. He knew that he had neither the power nor the permission to destroy Nehemiah and the Jews so he used an unattributable whisper campaign to cast doubt upon his loyalty. Knowing Artaxerxes' experiences and weakness, Sanballat took full advantage. His accusation was twofold:

1. Israel was completing the walls which would give them strength to hold out for a while against besiegers.
2. Israel was proclaiming Nehemiah as king which would give them the leadership and political credibility to do the same.

By allowing Nehemiah a glimpse of the accusations that they were going to use against him at the Persian court, Sanballat hoped that he would feel the need to meet to defend himself. After all, Nehemiah had "rudely" rejected his offer four times, even after Sanballat had made "good faith" efforts. Wasn't Nehemiah the one being unreasonable?

VV 8-9 – Now Nehemiah pushed back hard against Sanballat, Tobiah and Geschem the Arab. He openly accused them of starting rumors for their own political gain.

Illustration – When groups can't get what they want in America through the political process, they go to the courts. A court decision can overturn the will of the people.

Discussion Questions/Application

How has this happened to you? What have you done about it?

Separate the Leader from the People

V10 – The foes of Israel had another brilliant scheme. Nehemiah suspected a plot against him in the earlier verses, so he refused to meet his enemies in "neutral" territory. Shemaiah, a Jewish man who had shut himself up in his own house, perhaps out of fear, told Nehemiah that his life was in danger and so they both should take refuge in the Temple. However, only priests were allowed to enter into the building portion of the Temple, instead of the courts outside.

If Nehemiah succumbed to cowardice and fled, it would destroy his reputation. He would appear as a coward and violate an important part of the law. If he did not, since he knew that a plot against his life was real, he could be killed. Nehemiah knew exactly what he had to do; trust and obey. Whether he lived or died, he could not sin against God and he could not neglect his appointed task.

VV 11-13 – Nehemiah was a leader. He had a very public position and understood his influence. Knowing that his countrymen were watching his every move, and that their morale would sink if he was unrighteous or cowardly, he rebuked Shemaiah. He knew that he had been hired by Sanballat and Tobiah.

Nehemiah refused to be cowed and refused to flee to the temple.

V14 – Many people, even those he should have been able to trust, stood against Nehemiah. The foreigners Sanballat, Tobiah and Geschem the Arab were his most outspoken enemies, but even some of the prophets of Israel opposed him. Why?

1. Perhaps they thought that Nehemiah should accommodate the desires of the surrounding nations, trusting in their good will for Israel's security.
2. Perhaps they disliked Nehemiah personally and hoped that he would fail.
3. Perhaps they opposed God Himself, wanting Israel to become more secular, or at least less Jewish, like their neighbors. A wall would dramatize the separation between them.

Nehemiah made a special note of Noadiah the Prophetess, who also tried to breed fear in him and in the people. She is the only prophetess mentioned in the Bible to have directed opposed the work of God, although Miriam had her moments (Exodus 15:20). Deborah (Judges 4:4) and Huldah (2 Kings 22:14, 2 Chronicles 34:22) were faithful.

Illustration Example of Lincoln slinking into Washington DC, what he termed one of the biggest mistakes of his life. For fears of safety, Lincoln became a focus of scorn in his enemies and embarrassment among his supporters.

Discussion Questions/Application

Attack the People

V15 – The wall was built, albeit the finish was rough, in a remarkably short time.

V16 – As a result of their success, Israel’s enemies were put to shame and fear.

VV 17-19 – Tobiah had been especially dangerous. He was married to a daughter of Shecaniah, a Jewish leader, and his son was married to a daughter of Meshuliam, another Jewish notable. Tobiah may even have been partly of Jewish descent. Therefore they had extensive social networks, and many supporters, within the Jewish population.

Using these links, Tobiah sent letters to his friends emphasizing his good intentions and the reliability of his character. He undoubtedly reminded them that he had asked Nehemiah four times to come and discuss the wall, but the Jewish leader refused. Certainly he portrayed himself as reasonable and good, and Nehemiah as intransigent and self-seeking. The letters had their effect, because Jewish nobles sent letters back to Tobiah. Perhaps perceiving themselves as valued mediators, they reported the words of both sides to each other. In reality, however, they were tools in the hands of the opponents of God.

Illustration "PICTURES"

Discussion Questions/Application

How do you use political and social networks to advance the work of God? How do you use them to oppose His work? How have you done both?

Took (1040-1045)

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Verdict – What do you want them to DO as a result of the truths they have just received?

Additional Reading – MDHarrisMD.com.

Closing prayer