

March 3, 2024

SATAN'S STRATEGIES AND THE CHURCH'S RESPONSE

Nehemiah 3:1-7:3

*(6 of 9 in a series through Ezra-Nehemiah)*

Have you ever watched a television episode where it begins by showing the main character in a terrible position, making you wonder how in the world he'll get out of it? Perhaps it begins with him being bound and tortured before ruthless men, and they tell him they're finally going to kill him, and you're thinking, "Wait, how did we get here?" Then, all of the sudden the scene stops, the screen goes black, and up comes a message, "Three days earlier" or "Twelve hours earlier." And the episode picks up from there, at an earlier point in time, as you see the hero embarking on a dangerous mission.

In these episodes, the whole thing is tense because no matter how much you're pulling for the hero in the show to complete the complicated mission with ease, you already know it's not going to be smooth and easy. You've seen what's coming. He's going to get captured, tied up, and tortured. And so you watch it with tension, all the time wondering how in the world he's going to get out of the terrible situation in which you know he'll find himself.

Nehemiah 3:1-7:3 is kind of like that. They're trying to rebuild the wall, and they're being attacked every which way, and you're wondering how in the world this will all end. Except there's one crucial difference. Nehemiah 3 does function just like that opening scene in a television show that shows us where chapters 4-6 are going. Before reading chapter 4, you could have a black screen with white letters that says, "Fifty-two days earlier." But here's the crucial difference. Nehemiah 3 shows us that things end up well. It tells us that the wall gets built and all the gates reconstructed. Chapter 3 gives us a detailed account of how every portion of the wall and its gates get rebuilt and repaired. So as you read through Nehemiah 4:1-7:3, you don't have to feel tense. You know how it's going to end. And yet you see in each chapter after this opening one that getting to the completion of a wall was a path filled with all kinds of trials and tribulations.

It is this note of trials and tribulations that I want to focus on. It's hard to read these chapters—at least after the first one which provides a summary of the wall—without thinking that the main thread that ties each of these chapters together is that of adversity—trials and tribulations that the people of God faced as they constructed the wall. They're constant. Moreover, there are great similarities in our own day. First, we're told in Acts 14:22 that it is "through many tribulations" that we'll enter the kingdom God. And, second, when you look at the church in the early chapters of Acts and then throughout Paul's missionary journeys and his letters, you see these exact same trials and tribulations found in Nehemiah there as well.

Therefore, if we're guaranteed that Satan will continue his onslaught against the church until the Lord returns, and if these attacks have are similar in Nehemiah's day and in the days of the earlier church, it stands to reason that we should familiarize ourselves with the nature of the

enemy's attacks. Moreover, it stands to reason that we'd not only familiarize ourselves with Satan's strategies but also think through how we should respond to his attacks. And we have an opportunity to think through those very things as we look at Nehemiah 3:1-7:3.

So what I want to do this morning is walk through all the ways Satan launched attack against the work that Nehemiah was doing in leading in the rebuilding the wall at Jerusalem, see how he responded, and see how we can learn from that as well. But first let me set the stage for these chapters that we're looking at this morning.

I know that Nehemiah 3:1-7:3 is a lot of text to cover in one sermon, but it simply covers one event—the rebuilding of the wall around Jerusalem. It was a project that took fifty-two days from start to finish. But, as we've noted, there were a lot of attacks by the enemy along the way, making it doubtful this would ever happen. So here is how the chapters are laid out. Chapter 2 left us with Nehemiah having looked over the destroyed walls and burned gates and saying to the Jews, "Let's rebuild the walls," with them responding, "Let us rise up and build" (2:18).

Chapter 3 then gives us a long report of precisely who ended up rebuilding the wall and what precise areas they repaired and rebuilt. The words "repaired," "built," and "rebuilt" fill nearly every verse of this summary chapter of how the wall was completed. Chapter 4 then takes us back before chapter 3 to when they started building the wall and the adversity they faced. And the adversity is what fills chapters 4-6. Therefore, I want to walk through the text by noting the nature of the adversity and how they responded. First, we see mockery and threats are answered with prayer, trust, and persevering obedience.

### **Mockery and threats are answered with prayer, trust, and persevering obedience**

As chapter 4 begins, Sanballat the Horonite, an enemy of the Jews, enters the picture again. Last week when I said that Nehemiah was entering a hornet's nest by going back to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall. Steven Errico told me afterwards that I should have said a "Horonite's nest" instead. And he's certainly right. That was a missed opportunity. But as we're introduced to Sanballat again, we find that he and Tobiah and others are mocking and threatening the Jews as they set out to rebuild the wall.

Of Sanballat, we read, "And he said in the presence of his brothers and of the army of Samaria, 'What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore it for themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish up in a day? Will they revive the stones out of heaps of rubbish, and burned ones at that?'" And Tobiah joined him, saying, 'Yes, what they are building—if a fox goes on it he'll break down their stone wall!" (4:2-3).

They're mocking the Jews, as if they don't know what they're doing. But it didn't stop with mockery. We read in 4:7-8 that as the repairs began to happen, they were very angry, "And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and cause confusion in it."

Mockery and threats have been a tactic of the devil from the beginning. We can read of mockery as early as Genesis, as Ishmael mocked and laughed at Isaac. And we see threats in the early church. Right after the glorious events of Pentecost, we're told that Peter and John were arrested and threatened, and not with empty threats as many of these early believers became martyrs. We also see these realities in our own day. Just the other day almost every liberal newspaper of record had articles mocking the idea that embryos are human persons, looking at a court case in Alabama. And just a few weeks ago we prayed for our Nigerian brothers in Christ who have seen 50,000 martyrs in the last decade or so. One of the devil's constant attacks against the people of God will be mocking, threatening, and following through on those threats. Again, what we see here in Nehemiah is repeated throughout history and will be repeated until the coming of Christ.

But how did Nehemiah respond? Well, they prayed. We see the prayer in 4:4-5, "Hear, O our God, for we are despised. Turn back their taunt on their own heads and give them up to be plundered in a land where they are captives. Do not cover their guilt, and let not their sin be blotted out from your sight, for they have provoked you to anger in the presence of the builders." This is a prayer of imprecation, a prayer that makes sense when your enemies are threatening your life and that of your family. We're also told in 4:9 they prayed again and set a guard.

Then, we're told that they trusted in the Lord. Nehemiah said to his fellow Jews, "Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes" (4:14). And finally we're told that they just persevered in building. Right after the threats against them in verses 2-3 and their prayer in verses 4-5, we read, "So we built the wall. And all the wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work." Later, we read they worked with one hand and held a weapon with the other (4:17). But in each case they persevered in obeying what the Lord had given them to do.

This is precisely what we see the early church doing in the face of threats as well. In Acts 4 they pray and ask the Lord to give them boldness. Then they trust him and get right back to what the Lord had commanded them to do. This must be our approach as well. The day is coming and is now here when we will face mockery and threats from those who oppose the work of the Lord and are agents of the evil one. And they may well follow through on these threats. But our response must be to pray to our Lord for help, trust him, and then press on in obedience. This is the way God's people have always responded, and we must as well. Second, we see internal sin is answered by confronting sin with God's Word and repenting.

### **Internal sin is answered by fearing God, confronting sin with God's Word, and repenting**

In Nehemiah chapter 5 there is another threat to the work of rebuilding the wall, but this time the threat doesn't come from outside but from within. As the chapter opens we're told that there "arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers" (5:1). Now, why? Well, the main issue was that many of them needed food and were getting hungry,

unable to feed their families. Why was this the case? There were a few factors. First, we learn in verse 3 that there is a famine, so that's making things hard. Then, the king's tax is due. Artaxerxes exacted a tax from each of the families on their land, and it was due, and they didn't have the money. Therefore, some terrible things had happened to try to address the need. Some had mortgaged their field to their brothers to get money to eat and pay the tax, but when they did so, they were being charged a great interest by their brothers, making life even worse than it had been. In fact, it was so bad that some had to sell their children into slavery, unable to do anything else to generate money because their own countryman from whom they had borrowed money now owned their fields. And it gets even worse. Nehemiah will mention that when he found out that some children had been sold as slaves to foreign nations, he used Jerusalem's treasury to buy them back. But note what he says in 5:8, "We, as far as we are able, have bought back our Jewish brothers who have been sold to the nations, but you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us!" That is, some saw an opportunity to get rich by selling their children into slavery, knowing that Nehemiah would make sure to buy them back!

This was sin, every way you look at it. First, Deuteronomy 23:19-20 forbade charging interest to your brother in need. So they're violating that law. Second, I don't think I have to explain why selling your children into slavery to make a quick buck, knowing that Nehemiah would see that they were bought back was wrong. There was greed and covetousness all around. Some were getting filthy rich and others were losing everything they had and starving. The threat against completing the wall wasn't coming from outside the people but from within. It was their lack of holiness.

This too has been an attack from the enemy throughout the ages. Do you remember what happened in the early chapters of the book of Acts? I've already mentioned that in Acts 4 they were threatened and persecuted. Well, in Acts 5 and 6 the mission of the church is threatened as well, but this time from within. First, Ananias and Sapphira lie about their giving, threatening the church's holiness. Then, some in the church begin complaining against others in the church that their widows are being neglected. Again, this threat was from within, and it's more dangerous than any threat from outside.

So what did Nehemiah do? First, he calmed himself down. I think that's what 5:6-7 is telling us, as he says he was very angry, and then "Took counsel with himself." That is, he said, "Calm down and address the issue." And that's what he did. He brought charges, confronting the sin and calling the people to stop charging interest, to which they agreed. Then he told them, "Return to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the percentage of money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them" (5:11). And they did so. That is, he called them back to God's Word and to repentance. And he also called them to fear God.

We find that twice in Nehemiah's response. First, in 5:9 he says, "The thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies?" Then, Nehemiah mentions that he went without the provisions allotted to him by Persia as governor saying that he did not take them "because of the fear of God" (5:15). That is,

he knew that he and the people should be concerned about honoring God than making money or gaining prestige.

This is how the church must always respond. Over the last number of decades the church has wondered far from confronting sin in the church. I remember growing up and realizing that a man in the church was leaving his wife for another woman, even dating this girl publicly while still married. But nothing was done to him. Discipline was viewed as unloving. But we must realize that this is a tactic of the enemy to destroy the church's ability to carry out its mission. Paul tells us that a little leaven will leaven the lump, meaning, sin will spread. Cornerstone can continue to thrive in the midst of persecution. But if we start ignoring unrepentant sin, we might as well close the doors. We must fear God, confront sin with God's Word, and repent when our sin is exposed. And there was one more attack. Third, we see slander, attempts to distract, and enticements to compromise are answered by keeping our focus on God's commands.

### **Slander and attempts to distract and compromise are answered by focusing on God's commands**

Nehemiah 6 shows the craftiness of our enemy through the enemies of Nehemiah's day. They first sought to distract Nehemiah, as Sanballat tells Nehemiah to come and talk with him, asking him repeatedly to divert himself away from the wall for a meeting. Then, when that won't work, they begin to slander him. We read in 6:5-7 that Sanballat wrote a public letter, telling Nehemiah that in it he wrote, "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 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." Now, none of those charges are true. This is an attempt to distract and slander. But that's not all.

In 6:10 we read that a man named Shemaiah tempts Nehemiah to compromise. Nehemiah says, "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.'"

The reason this was an temptation to compromise is because this would have been a move of cowardice, but more importantly, it would have been a violation of the law to go into the temple where only priests were allowed, and even then only at certain times. Nehemiah would have died just like Uzzah, who touched the ark when it fell.

This too is an attack the enemy will always throw at us. If he doesn't stop us with threats or through the corruption of sin in the local church, then we will be the objects of slander. In the early church, they were accused of being cannibals and given to incest because they ate the Lord's supper and called one another brother and sister and gave one another a holy kiss. In other words, the believers were doing nothing wrong, but this was the slanderous spin put on it by the world. The same will happen with us. We won't be accused of fighting for children to

have fathers and mothers when we oppose homosexual marriage. We'll be accused of being bigots. We won't be accused of fighting for the lives of children as we oppose abortion. We'll be accused of wanting to harm women who have already been victimized. We won't be accused of keeping children from giving into the harmful affects of gender dysphoria. We'll be accused of facilitating suicide. We've already seen this. And we'll be enticed to focus on other things or even compromise our holiness, being asked to agree to things that defy God's Word.

So how did Nehemiah respond? To the distractions, he said, "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?" (6:3). He refused to turn away from what the Lord had commanded him to do. How did he respond to the slander? He simply denied them and kept obeying, saying, "No such things as you say have been done, for you are inventing them out of your own mind" (6:8). To the temptation to compromise, he answered Shemaiah, "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" (6:11). He clung to God's Word and obeyed.

They kept their focus on the Lord and obeyed his commands, and we read in 6:15-16, "So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem, for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God." And then 7:1-3 tells us how Nehemiah appointed people to guard the city, govern the city, etc. It is a glorious end where God's people obeyed him, and God was glorified.

These will be the tactics the enemy will continue against us as well, and we must be prepared simply to say, "Those charges aren't true. We'll not be distracted. We'll just keep obeying God's Word."

I don't want us to be deceived. Our enemy will make sure that we bear all kinds of trials and tribulations. He'll mock, threaten, harm, distract, entice, and slander. He'll aim to corrupt the holiness we practice as God's people. We must be on guard, strengthening our backbone to stand in fear of God, on his Word, and with an undistracted commitment to obedience.

Interestingly, even after the glorious news that the wall was completed, God was glorified, and the nations feared, we still get a note in 6:17-19 that Tobiah was still working with people in the city to undermine Nehemiah's leadership, reminding us that the enemy will keep attacking, until the day he is judged. But may it be said of us that we will keep trusting and obeying that Lord until he returns, which brings us back to chapter 3.

Why start this tense story by, well, taking all the tension out of end and telling us how it will end from the start? Perhaps because we can do the same with ourselves. I don't know what all trials and tribulations we'll face. It may cost us our jobs or our very lives to stand and obey our Lord. But I do know how the story ends. The one who loved us and died and rose so that we might have forgiveness of sins and eternal life is one day coming back. And when he comes, he'll judge his enemies and save his people so that we'll dwell with him forever in a new heavens and new earth. So let's pray, trust, and obey our Lord until that great day, whatever it costs. Amen.