

Nehemiah 6:1-19

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[0 : 00] We do turn in your Bibles to Nehemiah chapter 6. And so we've looked at the opposition in general terms from the outside and then last week we saw the opposition from within.

And how that kind of a regular pattern it seems emerges. You find that in Nehemiah but also in the acts of the apostles that the attacks get more personal.

Where there is a work of God going on. In chapter 6 this is what we see. In chapter 6 the opposition is aimed at Nehemiah himself.

And it's a good reminder isn't it I think to us that God's leaders are especially in need of prayer. Of God's people. Those who are leaders in God's people are especially in the firing line and in need of prayer.

And so here in chapter 6 it is Nehemiah himself. Not just the work in general that's under attack. They go after him. And I want you to notice first of all how the attack comes.

[1 : 32] And then secondly we'll go on to consider how the attack comes to Nehemiah. And it comes in four different ways. But first of all just notice when the attack comes. Look at verse 1.

And there went Samballat and Tobiah and Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies heard that I built the wall and there was no breach in it. There were no gaps in it. Although up to that time I had not set up the doors and the gates.

The work was as good as finished. It's almost done. Only the gates needed to be hung. And they were ready to cut the ribbons and to start the celebrations. But that is when you most need to watch out.

And that's most when you need to have your spiritual wits about you. Paul says, That's when you think you've made it.

It's when you think you're home and dry. It's when you think all is okay. That's when you're most at risk. And I think we see that again and again through the Bible, don't we? So you take for example King David.

[2 : 39] Do you remember when David fell into that sin with Bathsheba? Which spoiled his life. He's a man in the middle ages. He's in his early 50s. It damaged him spiritually. He was never the same again. And it's interesting to notice when it happened.

So it happened to Samuel 11 verse 1. At the time when kings go out to battle. But David doesn't go out to battle. He's a king. So why is he at home? Well David has become complacent.

He's never lost a fight. Never lost a fight since he became king of Israel. He's won them all up to this point. He's never known failure. He's never known defeat. And it's at that precise moment that the devil comes and attacks him personally.

With disastrous consequences. When did Jonah, think of Jonah. When did Jonah fall into self-pity and thoughts of suicide? When did that happen?

Was it when he was at the bottom of the Mediterranean and the belly of the fish? No, it's not, is it? It's not chapter 2. It's chapter 4 of Jonah. At the end of the book, he's preached to Nineveh.

[3 : 42] He's been used by God in what is probably the most glorious of revivals in the history of the church. A whole pagan city turns to God through the preaching of Jonah.

And it's after that. The fighting shifted from the city of Nineveh, which up until that time had been a stronghold of Satan really.

But now God had taken that city through the preaching of Jonah. And the devil turns his attention from a pagan city to the heart of Jonah.

And Jonah becomes, doesn't he, full of city and self-pity. And he prays that God would even take his life. Think of Joseph. When did Joseph come closest to compromising his testimony?

Was it in the pit in that desert after his brothers had thrown him into the pit? Was it when he was being dragged into slavery? Or was it when he was in prison in Egypt?

[4 : 39] When did Joseph come nearest to making shipwreck? Well, it's after he's been promoted, isn't it? He's in charge of part of his house. He's been given free run of part of his house. That's when the devil attacks him.

Just when he thinks, things are beginning to come together for me. Things are beginning to look good for me. It's at that very moment that the devil comes and attacks him. And so you see in chapter 6 verse 1, we're supposed to see the work is almost done.

The only thing that needs doing is to hang the gates. And they're proper places and the building work is finished. There's nothing left to do but hang the gates. And it's at that precise moment that Nehemiah comes under the severest attack.

And how does this attack come? Well, it comes in three or four ways. We're told in the New Testament that as Christians, we're not to be unaware of Satan's schemes and attacks.

We're not to be ignorant of Satan's devices. We're to know as Christians how the devil works. And the devil doesn't have any new tricks. And so if we can find out in this chapter how he attacks Nehemiah, we'll be in good stead as a church when we're under attack.

[5 : 53] Firstly, there at the beginning the devil comes and attacks Nehemiah by intrigue. And then he comes by innuendo. And when that fails, he comes by intimidation.

And then lastly by infiltration. It's a little bit twee, isn't it? All right? But you've got to give me credit for alliteration. Intrigue, innuendo, intimidation, infiltration.

You won't remember that. Okay. Intrigue. Let's look at the opening verses. Verses one to four. Now when Sambalat and Tobiah and Geshem, the Arab and the rest of our enemies, heard that I'd built the wall and there was no breach left in it.

Although up to that time I'd not set the doors and the gates, Sambalat and Geshem sent to me saying, Come, let's meet together at Hachiferim, the plain of Ono. But they intended to do me harm. I sent messages to them saying, 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? They sent to me four times in this way. I answered them in the same manner.

[6 : 59] The devil's smile is far more dangerous than his frown. He's far more dangerous as an angel of light than he is as a prowling lion.

And up to now in Nehemiah, the devil has been a prowling lion. But here he changes skies. And these men who've done their damnness to halt the work, now the work has almost finished.

They come on friendly. Come, let's meet together in one of the villages. We've had our disagreements in the past. We've not always seen eye to eye about things.

We probably still don't see eye to eye, but there's no point on carrying on like this. Now the work is almost finished. Why don't we meet up for a chat? How about the plain of Ono?

That's a neutral spot. You pick a village near Nehemiah and we'll meet there. Sounds very reasonable. It's very attractive. After all, nobody wants to be fighting all the time.

[7 : 56] Why fight when you can be friends? Why? And there's lots of God's people that have been taken in by that kind of reasoning. But not Nehemiah. He recognizes the voice of the enemy, doesn't he?

He says there in verse 2, They thought to do me harm. Behind the smiles, behind the welcome, the reasonableness of this approach, Nehemiah could see the enemy was out to get him.

False religion is always very smiley and very, very amenable. That's what he says in verse 3, isn't it?

It's a magnificent answer. I sent messengers to them saying, 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?

That is a magnificent answer. He says, what is there to talk about? Do you remember earlier on in chapter 2 in verse 20, he's already said to them, But you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem.

[9 : 02] We're not in the same business. We cannot make common cause. There's nothing to talk about. We're not on the same side.

We've got nothing in common. And so he says, I can't afford the luxury of stopping the work just to attend a conference. He's very sure about it.

He tells them in verse 4, We're told they sent this message to him four times and he answered them in the same manner. And I think that is one of the great lessons every Christian leader needs to learn.

It's the lesson of priorities. Of learning how to say no under pressure. It's by far the hardest thing in Christian ministry, I find, to say no. And so the Christian leader needs to be available to all kinds of people, yes, but he must never be a puppet whose strings are being pulled by someone else. Alistair Begg, just before I became the minister here, I went to a conference and he was speaking at it and he was just chatting really and he said, If you're a new minister, you say to your elders, I will be your servant, but you will never be your master.

[10:14] Sorry, I will be your servant, but you will never be my master. It's a great line. I will be your servant, but you will never be my master.

And Nehemiah was no puppet on a string. He knew what he was about. He knew what his priorities were. And so he refused to be drawn away by lesser priorities.

Listen to this quote from the diary of Jim Elliot. You know, he's one of the greats of the 20th century. He was martyred in South America. And his challenging diary, he thinks about his work and his ministry, and he says this, he makes his ministers a flame of fire.

And then he asks this question, Am I ignitable? God, deliver me from the dread asbestos of other things. Saturate me with the oil of the spirit that I may be a flame, but flame is transient, often short-lived.

Canst thou bear this, my soul, short life? In me there dwells the spirit of the great short-lived, whose zeal for God's house consumed him.

[11:24] Make me thy feral flame of God. You see what Nehemiah says? He says, How can I leave this work that God has given me to do?

I will not be distracted. God, deliver me from the dread asbestos of other things. The apostles say, don't they, it is not right that we should leave the word of God to serve tables or to sit around them on committees.

So intrigue doesn't work on Nehemiah. So the devil steps up the attack and he moves from intrigue to innuendo and the mask begins to slip a little bit. Only a little. Look at verse 5. In the same way, Sambalat for the fifth time sent his servant to me with an open letter in his hand.

He forgot to seal it, did he? You wonder, don't you, how many people read that letter before it got to him. People were just as nosy then as they are now and I'm sure that many people read it before it got to Jerusalem.

There's a rumor going around about you, Nehemiah and they should know because they started it with the open letter. They've deliberately started a rumor by means of an open letter. And in the letter itself, they're pretending to be concerned for Nehemiah's safety.

[12:41] It's a poisonous letter. Look at verse 6. In it was written, it's reported among the nations and Geshem who also says it that you and the Jews intend to rebel and that's why you're building the wall and according to these reports you wish to become the king.

It's reported. Rumors always start like that, don't they? A little bird told me someone said and then things got exaggerated and distorted and twisted and the rumor does the rounds and so it was here.

We feared that you even planned to be king. The whole thing is being exaggerated and distorted and verse 7, can you see that? When the king will hear of these reports.

Well, so now, let's come and take counsel together. We're concerned about you. The rumor is very dangerous. Politically, the contents of this letter, they could be very damaging to you, Nehemiah. They could even cost you your life if Artaxerxes hears about it. If it gets as far as him and the temptation, of course, when that sort of thing happens is what? It's to defend yourself, isn't it?

[13:46] And that comes naturally to all of us. But that becomes a huge, huge distraction from the work of the gospel and the church. So while Nehemiah is busily defending himself on the plain of Ono, there are still great gaping holes in the walls of Jerusalem, the enemy to ride through.

The gates have not yet been hung and Nehemiah has enough discernment. Look what he says in verse 8. Then I sent to him saying, No such thing as you say have been done for you are inventing them out of your own mind.

For they all wanted to frighten us thinking their hands will drop from the work and it will not be done. But now, O God, strengthen my hands. Verse 8 is one of my favorite verses in the Bible.

I'd love to write it sometimes to some of you. Dear Sir, dear Madam, no such thing as you have said has been done for you are inventing them out of your own mind.

Yours sincerely, Paul. I wouldn't be brave enough to do it. But that is the way to deal with innuendo, isn't it? That is the way to deal with rumor. Let God deal with that.

[14:57] Hand it over to him. That's what the Lord Jesus did, didn't he? That's how our Savior, the cross, we're told, when they reviled Jesus, he didn't revile them back.

He committed himself to the God who judges righteously. Don't be sidetracked. He's doing God's work. He's not building an empire for himself. He's not trying to become the king of Judah.

If he was, well, he'd be very, very concerned about the rumors, wouldn't he? If he was trying to become king, he would be desperate to manage his public image. But he's not concerned about his image.

He's just concerned to get on with God's work. He's not consumed with what will people think. He sees through it.

It's a ploy of the enemy. And so he has to try something else. Innuendo fails to frighten Nehemiah. Intrigue doesn't work and so they resort to intimidation. verse 10. Now when I went into the house of Shemaiah, the son of Deliah, the son of Mechetabel, who was confined to his home, he said, let us meet together in the house of God within the temple.

[16:11] Let us close the doors of the temple for they are coming to kill you. It's intimidation of the worst sort because it's done in the name of God. It doesn't come out as clearly here as I think it should do.

It's dressed up as a kind of oracle. It's dressed up as a prophecy. And it's presented to Nehemiah as a word from God. In much the same way kind of phony prophets dress up their words of knowledge.

And Shemaiah is not here passing on a rumor. He's speaking as a prophet. He's claiming divine authority. There's poetic form here. God has told me that someone is going to kill you.

And I think if you're all spiritually sensitive you have to take this to heart. You can ignore the emails. You can ignore the anonymous letters.

You can ignore all that. You can ignore the intrigue. And you can ignore the pressure of the world and from unbelieving church leaders you can dismiss that. But when somebody comes and claims that they have a word from God for you.

[17:20] If you're spiritually sensitive at all you find that very difficult just to brush aside. And it's spiritual terrorism. That if you don't go along with this you will know God's curse.

It's intimidation of the worst sort. Nehemiah is a godly man. There's a danger that the worker could be really affected. He could shrug off all the other attacks.

The innuendo the intrigue. He can see through all that. He knew what to do with all that. But here there's real danger that he's distracted and drawn away from the work. Because how can you ignore a word from the Lord?

What do you say? The Lord has told me this brother. What do you say to that? And it wasn't just Shemiah. There's a whole lot of them. Verse 14. You've got this prophetess Noah Dyer.

You've got the rest of the prophets who would have made me afraid. He's really under attack. How does he deal with it? Well he sees through it very clearly verses 11 to 13.

[18:23] And it's another ploy to stop the work. Look what he says in verse 11. But I said 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.

And I understood and saw that God had not sent him but he pronounced the prophecy against me because Tobiah and some ballots had hired him. For this purpose he was hired that I should be afraid and act in this way in sin and so they could give me a bad name in order to taunt me.

So how did Nehemiah know what the devil was up to? How did he recognize these were false prophets? Did he have a kind of sixth sense?

He says then I perceived that God hadn't sent them at all. They'd be hired by the enemy to intimidate me and to frighten me and to stop the work. Then I perceived well how did you perceive Nehemiah? How did he know that they were false prophets?

It's very very simple. Because what these people were asking him to do was contrary to God's law. You can look it up. Nehemiah 18 verses 6 and 7.

[19:35] You'll find it there. Let me read you the verses. This is God's law. God's written word. And behold I've taken your brothers the Levites from among the people of Israel. They are a gift to you

given to the Lord to do the service of the tent of meeting.

And you and your sons with you shall guard your priesthood for all that concerns the altar. and that is within the veil and you shall serve. I gave your priesthood as a gift and any outsider who comes near shall be put to death.

And so here are these false prophets saying to Nehemiah Nehemiah who is not a Levite who had no business to be in the holy place. Here are these people saying God has told us to save your life and you Nehemiah need to hide in the holy place.

Literally they use that expression. Nehemiah is not a priest he's not a Levite and so even to save his life would be a form of sacrilege.

He has no business being in the holy place. In fact he's endangering his life isn't he if you take Numbers 18 seriously. And so it's very clear that when a word when a so-called word from the Lord violates the written word of God you know that you're dealing with a false prophet because God never ever contradicts himself.

[21 : 01] Well there's a fourth strategy that comes to light at the very end of the chapter and it comes to light only after it's finished and it's been going on all the time and we'll call it infiltration okay look at verse 17 after the work was done the doors were hung and moreover in those days the nobles of Judah sent many letters to Tobiah and Tobiah's letters came to them for many in Judah were bound by oath to him because he was the son-in-law of Shekariah the son of Arar and his son Joah you can read it had been the daughter of Meshulam the son of Berechiah as his wife also they spoke of his good deeds in my presence and reported my words to him and Tobiah sent letters to make me afraid so while all this has been going on this personal attack on Nehemiah culminating in spiritual terrorism while all of that has been going on Nehemiah is under such great pressure all the time the enemy has infiltrated the city and there's some kind of liaison some kind of agreement between Sanballat and Tobiah and some of the nobles of Judah how devastating that is that there were men involved in the rebuilding of Jerusalem who at the same time were in bed with the enemy and passing information to them men who were involved in the rebuilding of

Jerusalem who were now pleading the enemy's cause and they were key workers Shekinah and Meshulam were both mentioned in chapter 3 Meshulam is singled out there as one of those doing overtime he's a zealous worker he's enthusiastic in rebuilding the walls but even in the midst of rebuilding the walls he's conniving with the enemy I think if you'd have asked him to justify what they were doing they might not even have been aware of what they were doing they may well not have been deliberately setting out to undermine Nehemiah and yet they were unwittingly tools of the devil like John Bunyan's man facing two ways they were working on the wall and maintaining contact with those whose only desire was to break it down and perhaps they thought Nehemiah you're far too black and white about things why must it always be Nehemiah us and them do we always have to be fighting does it always have to be either or can't it be both and and all this was going on and with all this going on it's a wonder that the wall was ever built but it was so look at verse 15 so the wall was finished on the 25th day of the month of Elel in 52 days and when all our enemies heard of it all the nations around us were afraid and they fell greatly in their own esteem for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God the gates of hell shall never prevail against the church of

God and hell has its parliament that's what the gates of hell means hell has its resolutions which are passed hell has its decisions which are being made and hell has its plans to formulate to destroy the work of God but the gates of hell shall never prevail and the work that God begins he shall complete let's pray let's Thank you.