

“With the Help of Our God”

The Sixteenth in a Series of Sermons on Ezra-Nehemiah

Texts: Nehemiah 6:1-19; Rev. 12:1-17

If you cannot thwart your enemy’s efforts by mockery or by threats of invasion, you hope that internal strife will do him in. If that does not work, then you can kill him—or at least you can threaten to kill him so that your enemy becomes so intimidated by the threat, he simply gives up and those under his leadership become lost sheep without a shepherd. If threats like this do not work, you can take the less radical but equally desperate step of inventing falsehoods and then threatening to reveal these falsehoods publically. You might even trick your enemy into doing something foolish which might even cost him his own life, if not his reputation. The Book of Nehemiah has been full of twists and turns already, but things ratchet up greatly when death threats and blackmail become part of our story.

We are continuing our study of the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah, and as we saw last time, the people of Israel faced a serious dilemma. The walls of their city are in ruins. They live under constant threat of invasion—a real and pressing danger. No one is safe and everyone lives in constant fear of attack. Under the capable leadership of Nehemiah, the entire population in and around Jerusalem, devoted themselves to the massive effort of rebuilding Jerusalem’s walls, gates, and fortifications so that the city is once again secure and the people safe from attack. While everyone in the Jerusalem area benefits from this rebuilding effort, the price was very high. The work which was required to rebuild the walls, took people away from their daily tasks of providing food and shelter and the necessities of life. The longer this daily work was neglected, the greater was the crisis facing the people.

As we saw last time, Nehemiah chapter 5 recounts a troubling incident during the rebuilding process in which the people of Israel cried out to God because of growing and serious hardships. The daily work required to provide food, water, clothing, and shelter was not being done because the men were working hard to rebuild the walls. But they were not paid for this work, nor taking care of crops and fields. Shortages were growing severe and many of the people began doing desperate things in order to survive. Some were taking out loans on their small plots of land to secure enough money to buy the necessities of life. Some were forced to become indentured-servants, or even worse, forced to deliver their children into service as laborers (in the case of girls, as concubines). Just as they had done in their time in Egypt, when they labored under the cruel hand of the Pharaoh, the people of Israel cried out to YHWH for deliverance. He heard their cries in Egypt. He hears them in Jerusalem a thousand years later.

It was not just the shortages, but cruel injustice inflicted upon the poor and needy which lay at the heart of the crisis. Those making loans to desperate people and forcing them into debt-slavery were their fellow Jews. Some (like Nehemiah) made loans to struggling people with the intention of helping them endure the present crisis. But such help wasn’t really help. Once someone took out a debt they could not possibly repay, they would lose everything. Jewish law required that all debts be repaid, forcing those borrowers who defaulted to become debt-slaves who then lost everything.

This was a time of national emergency and it was out of desperation that people mortgaged their property, an especially difficult circumstance since the reason people could not repay their loans was because they were off working on the walls, labor for which they were not reimbursed. But some of the wealthy among them loaned money, knowing in advance that the borrower could not repay the loans, and

did so as a way to acquire the person's property when they inevitably defaulted. Some even stooped so low as to indenture those who defaulted, and were in turn selling these indentured servants to fellow Jews or even Gentiles.

It was during the time of rebuilding that the situation finally reached the point of crisis. The threat of revolt was suddenly just as real as the injustices being heaped upon the Israelites by their own brothers. Upon discovering that this was happening, Nehemiah was furious. He gathered himself and called an assembly of priests and elders to address the matter. To summarize chapter 5, Nehemiah put an immediate end to this situation. We read in Nehemiah 5:10–12 that he told the assembly, “*I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us abandon this exacting of interest. 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.*’ Then they said, ‘*We will restore these and require nothing from them. We will do as you say.*’ And I called the priests and made them swear to do as they had promised.” The exploitation of the people by their own brethren will not continue. All lost property will be restored. The people affirmed Nehemiah's judgment with a hearty “amen” and then ceased all unjust practices.

But our old friend Sanballat was not one to give up. Ridicule did not work, nor did his threat of attack. Nehemiah's decisive action to right the wrongs inflicted upon the people, and to put an immediate end to such cruel injustice, kept the Israelites from revolting. In fact, as we will learn in chapter 6, work continued and the walls of Jerusalem were nearing completion, except for the critical entry points, the city's gates. There was still one last opportunity to for Israel's enemies to stop the Israelites before the walls were completed, and Jerusalem regained its security and its reputation. This brings us to Nehemiah 6 and our text for this sermon.

As Nehemiah recounts these events in the opening verses of chapter 6, we learn that things were progressing quite well. But there will be yet another effort made by those who do not want to see Jerusalem restored and the worship of YHWH continue. “*Now when Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies heard that I had built the wall and that there was no breach left in it (although up to that time I had not set up the doors in the gates), Sanballat and Geshem sent to me, saying, ‘Come and let us meet together at Hakkephirim in the plain of Ono.’ But they intended to do me harm.*” The plain of Ono is midway between Jerusalem and Samaria (which, by the way, is not far from the present site of Ben Gurion International Airport, outside TelAviv).¹ It would take well over a day's journey for Nehemiah to travel to this location which was on the frontier of Judah's border with Samaria. A meeting here would take Nehemiah out into the wilderness where he could be easily assassinated. Nehemiah senses that this was a scheme designed to take him out of the picture since nothing else Sanballat tried had worked. If he went to such a place, his enemies could kill him, or arrange his death under mysterious circumstances. Whatever they were planning, there were obviously up to no good.

This is where the story of Nehemiah and the biblical subplot of “Christ versus the Antichrist” intersect. Sanballat is upset that Nehemiah got his job (governor of Judah). As a Samaritan, Sanballat sees the Jews as apostates, and the returning exiles as rebuilding a rival (false) temple to the one accepted by the Samaritans on Mount Gerazim. Sanballat's opposition to Nehemiah and the efforts of the returned exiles to rebuild Jerusalem is personal. The last thing he wants is for his replacement to rebuild and return to greatness the very city (Jerusalem) which stands in opposition to everything he holds dear. Tobias is his

¹ Davis [Ezra-Nehemiah](#) (part thirteen)

underling (yet has close ties to the Jewish nobles), and the mouthpiece of Samaritan efforts to stop the rebuilding of Jerusalem. Geshem is the leader of a vast Arabian empire to the south. A rebuilt Jerusalem threatens his trading interests. These men all have personal reasons to oppose the rebuilding of Jerusalem from the shambles it been since it was sacked and destroyed by the Babylonians in 587.

Yet on another level these men are clearly doing the bidding of Satan. This is the city of David and his promised messianic descendant. This is the temple where sacrifices are offered to YHWH to turn aside his wrath from his people—types and shadows of the cross and saving work of Jesus Christ. Satan seeks to thwart the progress of redemption, and if he can use the personal efforts of Sanballat, Tobias, and Geshem to do that, well then so much the better.

We see Satan's attempts to do just this in several biblical passages. One such passage closely tied to the rebuilding of the temple and the city is Zechariah 3. There Satan accuses Joshua before the Lord. Joshua (Jeshua) was the first high priest after the temple was rebuilt, a man who is mentioned several times in the Book of Ezra. The Lord's response to Satan's accusations was to strip off Joshua's filthy priestly garments (symbolic of his sins and failures as high priest) and to replace them with spotless new priestly garments, (symbolic of Joshua being clothed by the righteousness of Christ).

In Revelation 12 (our New Testament lesson) we read of Satan's pursuit of the woman (Mary, as a member of Israel) into the wilderness, seeking to devour her male child (Jesus). This was fulfilled when Mary and Joseph took Jesus into Egypt to protect him from Herod's "slaughter of the innocents"—all the two year old males in Bethlehem as recounted in Matthew 2. With the coming of Jesus, Satan was cast from heaven (as John describes in Revelation 12) and now roams the earth like a savage animal, mortally wounded, but who acts in rage until his final demise at the Lord's return. Even though he seeks to stop the coming of Jesus, he cannot, and Jesus will indeed crush him through the cross and empty tomb.

Here, in Nehemiah 6, we find Satan in the centuries before his defeat at Calvary's cross, attempting to prevent the coming of the Messiah, this time indirectly. Satan repeatedly attacks (using the agency of Sanballat and others) the returned exiles who rebuild their temple, and who are now rebuilding the city which will play such an important role in Jesus' messianic mission and kingdom. The tactics Satan uses against Nehemiah and those Jews rebuilding Jerusalem—force, deception, and strife, and the threat of assassination—are but a foreshadowing of what comes to fruition in Revelation 12.

When Nehemiah refuses Sanballat's invitation to meet on the plain of Ono, we see, from one redemptive-historical vantage point, the on-going war between the Christ and the Antichrist. Although, Nehemiah and his antagonists (the enemies of Israel) see this as an effort to finish the walls (in the case of Nehemiah) or to stop their rebuilding (in the case of Sanballat, Tobias, and Geshem), the fact is that rebuilt walls and gates of Jerusalem are necessary for the city to return to order and safety. If Jerusalem is not rebuilt and the sacrifices in the temple are not properly offered, then Satan has succeeded.

Smelling something rotten in Sanballat's offer, Nehemiah wisely refuses to take the bait. *"And 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?'"* Nehemiah knows that being far away from Jerusalem, he is vulnerable to those who would seek to do him harm. He also knows that nothing ought to distract him from his primary purpose—the great work he is doing—rebuilding the walls, especially as the project is nearing completion. Nehemiah discerns that Sanballat, Tobias, and Geshem are plotting against him—perhaps even scheming to kill him. Nehemiah also knows talking to them is a distraction. Talking means no work will get done. What purpose then, is served by even talking to the self-professed enemies

of Israel? Why put himself in danger at the hand of Israel's enemies?

Sanballat is perhaps Nehemiah's equal in one small area—persistence. According to verse 4, “*and they sent to me four times in this way, and I answered them in the same manner.*” The guy will just not give up! Eventually, Sanballat realizes that appealing to Nehemiah to leave Jerusalem is getting him nowhere, so he tries something else—blackmail. In verse 5, Nehemiah reports that “*in the same way Sanballat for the fifth time sent his servant to me with an open letter in his hand.*” Ridicule failed. Threats failed. Internal division didn't work. Drawing Nehemiah away from Jerusalem into a trap didn't work. So Sanballat—undeterred—issues a written statement repeating the many false and slanderous allegations which Sanballat and his cronies have been making against Nehemiah and Israel all along. In other words, Sanballat threatens to open a Facebook account and begin dishing on Nehemiah and the Israelites.

The contents of his open letter are transparently false and designed to force Nehemiah to leave Jerusalem to meet with Sanballat. According to verses 6-8, Sanballat's letter stated “*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 these 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.*” In other words, come and meet with me at Ono, or else I'll start spreading these false rumors, and I will send this letter on to the Persian capital so Artaxerxes will find out what is really going on in Jerusalem. This is blackmail, plain and simple.

Sanballat's letter—which he threatens to mail to Artaxerxes and make public—attempts to do two things so as to force Nehemiah's hand. The first is that Sanballat hopes to drive a wedge between Nehemiah and the Jewish people. If the people fear that Artaxerxes will turn against them because of Nehemiah's actions, well then, perhaps they will turn against Nehemiah to keep the Persians from pulling the plug on the rebuilding. Sanballat's second aim is to undermine Nehemiah's relationship with Artaxerxes. His letter accuses Nehemiah of insurrection against Artaxerxes and his vast Persian empire by falsely asserting that Nehemiah is preparing a revolt against the Persians, naming himself king.

Nehemiah's response is to call Sanballat's bluff, again. We read in verses 8-10, “*then I sent to him, saying, ‘No such things 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.*” Nehemiah won't cave into Sanballat's falsehoods. He sees completely through Sanballat's ruse and knows that all of the accusations are false and will not stand. Presumably, Artaxerxes has been kept informed by his own people of what has been transpiring in Jerusalem. Nehemiah has nothing to fear. The old saying is true—“he who has nothing to hide, hides nothing.” It is also remarkable that in the last line in verse 10, Nehemiah offers a short prayer for strength (for his hands) presumably to help him finish the work of rebuilding the city's walls and gates.

The next section of this chapter (vv.10-14) contains the account of what we can only describe as a truly bizarre incident in which a hired false prophet seeks to undo Nehemiah's credibility with the people by encouraging him to perform an act which might cost Nehemiah his life, if not his ability to lead. We read in verse 10 of a mysterious and otherwise unknown prophet. “*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.’*” There is no other mention of the prophet “Shemaiah” anywhere else in the Bible. He is confined to his house (probably because he was ritually unclean in

some way),² and although nothing is said, the sense is that the prophet had contacted Nehemiah, who then went to the man's home to meet with him, probably so that this "prophet" might inform Nehemiah that he had an some important oracle from the Lord to deliver to Nehemiah. But this too was a Sanballat-inspired trap and a threat to Nehemiah's life.

The secret oracle had to do with a threat against Nehemiah's life—presumably orchestrated by Sanballat—that certain men were coming to kill Nehemiah at night, perhaps even that very evening. Nehemiah's response, in verse 11, reveals the trap hidden in this "prophet's" oracle. *"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.'"* Should Nehemiah enter the temple proper (the holy of holies, not just the outer courtyard) he would be subject of God's curse. Nehemiah was not a priest and had no right to enter the holy place within the temple. His response makes that point clear. "Who am I to go into the temple?" No doubt, Nehemiah remembered what happened to King Uzziah, who entered the temple under similar circumstances, and came away with a case of leprosy (as recounted in 2 Chronicles 26:16 ff). As one commentator points out, "Nehemiah, had he tried to save himself in such a way, would have lost, possibly his life, certainly his honor, and would have jeopardized the very cause he had at heart."³

Nehemiah was not worried about threats to his life but with doing what is right. He tells us in verses 12-13, *"and I understood and saw that God had not sent him, but he had pronounced the prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. For this purpose he was hired, that I should be afraid and act in this way and sin, and so they could give me a bad name in order to taunt me."* Shemaiah was trying to encourage Nehemiah to do something which both parties knew would provoke God to wrath. The so-called "prophet" did so, because Sanballat paid him to do so. Nehemiah understood that a prophet sent from God would never encourage Nehemiah to do something so reckless—something which would endanger his life and destroy his reputation with the people.

Nehemiah's reaction is truly remarkable and an example to all of us. Instead of seeking revenge or responding in kind, Nehemiah prays for the enemies of Israel and for those who so deceptively have sought his demise. We read in verse 14, *"Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God, according to these things that they did, and also the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who wanted to make me afraid."* Not only was Shemaiah paid to utter a false prophecy, so was at least one other woman—a "prophetess" Noadiah. There were many female prophetess in Israel's history. We think of Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah. But in Ezekiel 13:17-23, we read of false female prophets who lead the people astray though magic and fortune-telling. God says of them in verse 17, *"And you, son of man, set your face against the daughters of your people, who prophesy out of their own hearts. Prophecy against them."* Nehemiah prays that God will deal with Israel's enemies by name—Sanballat, Tobias, and now Noadiah. He trusts that God will deal with these people as only he can. Nehemiah knows that ultimately, YHWH is his protector. His concern is to do his duty and obey YHWH—regardless of the threats being made against him. He trusts that God will act on his behalf and vindicate him before his enemies. He prays that this will indeed be the case.

The chapter closes with wonderful news, and with the troubling report that there remains within Israel a group loyal to Sanballat's lackey Tobias, and who will continue to attempt to discredit Nehemiah. We

² Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 99.

³ Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 100.

read in verse 15 in words which are almost anticlimactic, *“so the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days.”* The people of Israel had done what seemed impossible. The Israelites had rebuilt the city’s walls and gates in a mere 52 days. None of the distractions thrown against them by Sanballat had worked. The people were now safe, and the city’s infra-structure (access to wells, gates for trash, gates which opened on marketplaces) was now restored. It was only a matter of time before life in Jerusalem returned to normal.

News like this spreads rapidly, even in the ancient world. Nehemiah tells us in verse 16, *“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.”* Israel’s enemies were in awe. YHWH received glory from the pagan nations who knew that such a thing could have never happened had not YHWH been with Israel. The pagans lost confidence in their power to thwart YHWH’s purposes. The great irony in all of this is that despite Sanballat’s repeated efforts to keep this from happening, Jerusalem has risen from the ashes, the temple and its people are now safe, and YHWH receives glory, even from the pagans who stand in awe at what he just been accomplished.

But there remains a fifth column within Israel—a group of nobles who oppose Nehemiah, and who not do appreciate his zeal for YHWH’s law. We read the troubling news in verses 17-18, that despite what happened, there were still those in Israel who preferred that things be returned to the way they were before Nehemiah arrived on the scene. *“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 Shecaniah the son of Arah: and his son Jehohanan had taken the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah as his wife.”* Come to find out, although Tobias was inferior in rank to Sanballat, and was as his servant, Tobias was far more influential with the Jews than Sanballat had been. He had deep family ties to the Jewish nobility, and through marriage to the high priest as well. There were oaths of loyalty sworn to Tobias by many of these people, and they remained in contact with Tobias, through various letters and communication. *“Never go against the family”* These people will create trouble for Nehemiah and Israel in the remaining chapters of the book. Nehemiah sets the stage for what is to come when he tells us in verse 19, *“also they spoke of his good deeds in my presence and reported my words to him. And Tobiah sent letters to make me afraid.”*

What do we take with us from this chapter in Nehemiah? The lesson is clear—do the right thing when difficult times come, regardless, because God always vindicates his people when they are in the right. In an age such as ours where Christians are mocked, ridiculed, slandered, and even threatened by non-Christians, we find in Nehemiah an important example. If our lives are characterized by a profession of faith in the saving work of Christ (and not by a smug self-righteousness), and by striving to love God and our neighbor, there will be little for non-Christians say against us. They may lie about us, they may seek to discredit us, they may threaten to spread lies about us, they may mock our beliefs, or even expose our private lives or secret sins. Yet, we still ought do what is right, despite the cost in the short-term. If the Book of Nehemiah teaches us anything it is that God always vindicates his people from the Sanballats and Tobias’ of the world. He may not do in that moment, but he will always do it at just the right time.

Let us not forget that our Savior (who was without sin) was mocked and ridiculed. Jesus was the victim of lies and falsehoods, the recipient of threats, and although he was the very Son of God, he was put to death for blasphemy at hands of those who claimed to be defending the religion of Israel. But God vindicated his sinless son Jesus, by raising him from the dead and raising him the Father’s right hand. Let us not forget that it was Jesus’ enduring terrible falsehoods, shame, threats, and suffering which secured our salvation from the guilt and power of sin.

Yes, there will be difficult times in this life when we called to do what is right in the face of determined opposition from the world around us, just as the saints of old such as Nehemiah endured. There is a cost to be paid for being a Christian in a pagan and godless culture such as ours. There will be times when we too must take up our crosses and follow the example of our Savior. This is never easy and we will pay the price. But as Nehemiah teaches us, it is God who is our defender.

As Paul reminds us at the end of Romans 8, no accusation made against Christ's own will ever stand. *"If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

Let us strive to do what is right, no matter how difficult, knowing that Jesus is our defender, and that nothing can ever separate us from his love.