

Nehemiah: Conspiracy

Nehemiah 6:1-14

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*The Lord's Day Evening
November 2, 2008*

Please open your Bibles to Nehemiah, chapter six...Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job, Psalms, Proverbs in our English Bibles. Of course, Nehemiah occurs historically in the wrong place, and in the Hebrew canon of course the book of Nehemiah falls where it historically belongs, at the end of the Old Testament. We're in roughly 445 or so B.C.

We come tonight to a section in which Nehemiah finds himself once again in trouble. He is the victim of plots and schemes. He finds himself in trial and difficulty. Maybe that's where you are tonight. You're a believer, you trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, you try to do His will; and your life is filled now with trials and difficulties, and they're not of your own making. You are conscious of enemies who are plotting against you...whispering, perhaps, against you. Well, this passage is certainly for you. Let's meet Nehemiah. Before we meet him in chapter six, let's come before God in prayer. Let us pray.

Father, we thank You again for the Scriptures that holy men of old wrote as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. We thank You that the Bible can teach us and instruct us and guide us and direct us. We thank You for its comfort. We thank You for its warnings. We thank You for its examples. We thank You for its precepts. Give us now discernment, that in reading and studying the Scriptures together we might see something of our Lord Jesus Christ, and we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen.

This is God's holy and inerrant word:

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. 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?” And they sent to me four times in this way, and I answered them in the same manner. In the same way Sanballat for the fifth time sent his servant to me with an open letter in his hand. In it was written, “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.” 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.

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.” 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 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. 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.”

Well, thus far God's holy and inerrant word.

Now, we left off a couple of weeks ago in chapter five of Nehemiah. Nehemiah was in the midst of a financial downturn in the markets of Jerusalem, and you'll remember that he introduced a series of initiatives involving mortgage lending and usury and so on in order to address this huge problem that was affecting the poor and the weak within Jerusalem, causing the testimony of the people of God to be in disarray.

Now trouble is never far away (and in Nehemiah it is never far away!), and having dealt with one series of trials and difficulties, another now comes immediately on its wake.

Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem—we've met them before in chapter 2. Sanballat is a Babylonian name. He's from Beth-Horon, a place maybe 16-17 miles northwest of Jerusalem. His daughter will marry Eliashib the son of the high priest, and he will have an introduction then into high society and high priestly society within Jerusalem. Historical records tell us that he was the governor of

Samaria and that his two sons had Jewish names. We infer that he wasn't Jewish, but that his wife was probably Jewish. He's an ambitious politician. He's the governor of Samaria to the north of Jerusalem. Like Nehemiah, he is under the authority of the Persians, but he wants to make a name for himself. He probably sees Nehemiah, and especially the building of the walls in Jerusalem, as a threat to his political ambitions.

Tobiah is a Jewish name. His son will also marry a high society daughter within Jerusalem. And Geshem — Geshem is an Arab. He's the governor of Edom and Moab, to the south and to the east of Jerusalem. He also has power of those regions on the way to Egypt. So we've got three would-be politically ambitious rulers to the north and to the east, and to the south and to the southwest — surrounding, more or less, Jerusalem. They have nothing in common except that they don't like what's going on in Jerusalem. They do not like Nehemiah or what they see as Nehemiah's own political ambitions, and they've come together as a trinity of political expediency for the purposes of bringing down Nehemiah.

Now, three things are going to happen in this section that we're looking at tonight, three strategies that they deploy in order to bring Nehemiah down. We're going to watch Nehemiah. We're going to see him as a leader, as a great leader, as a man of maturity and courage and discernment; a man who, in really difficult and tense situations, can keep his nerve, and can play the man, and can rise up and show nobility and strength, and a sense of purpose and vision.

I. The attempt to appeal to vanity.

The first strategy is an invitation to come to “talk” in a place called Ono. [Well, you all know the joke! They're invited to Ono, and Nehemiah says, “Oh, no!” ...Get that one out of the way!] *Laughter*. Sanballat and Geshem, they invite Nehemiah to a summit, a mini-summit, a summit that would produce perhaps some kind of political concordat, a statement...a statement of joint political ambition...perhaps an agreement, a pact to work together on areas of mutual concern. It's a deliberate attempt to try and appeal to Nehemiah's vanity, Nehemiah's sense of pride that he would be there *hoi polloi*ing it with the leaders, Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem. He would be one of the politically ambitious. But Nehemiah says, “They intended to do me harm.”

I suppose we could see that as (from one point of view) paranoia on Nehemiah's part. You could perhaps argue, ‘Well, Nehemiah has good grounds for thinking what he's thinking and for saying what he's saying,’ you understand; but you can understand that you could interpret Nehemiah's response here as a measure of paranoia—you know, the kind of thing that sees conspiracy everywhere. You know, black helicopters flying at every point, all kinds of insinuations of doom and darkness and gloom. He says no. He would have none of it.

You could accuse him of being imperialist. Didn't Winston Churchill say in the midst of the Second World War that "jaw-jaw is better than war-war"? What would there be to lose, to go to Ono and engage in talks? Better talk than war. But Nehemiah had sensed a trap. Behind this invitation there was probably an attempt to kidnap him. There may even be an attempt, according to some commentators, to kill him. Nehemiah senses that the letter has already been written:

"We are sorry to inform you, great peoples of Jerusalem, that your governor Nehemiah, prince among the Jews, on his way to Ono, his chariot hit a rock and his body was thrown into the air, and he was greatly hurt. And despite all of our best efforts to save him, he tragically died. We send to you our deepest sorrow and wish you well."

And Nehemiah thinks that letter has already been written. He shows political savvy. He shows discernment. He's a man of principle. He's a man who's not going to be tempted by a moment's political glory in the limelight of a mini-summit with the leaders of that territory.

Four times they ask him. Four times he says to them, "How can I leave this great work?" Now, folks, he was building a wall. It was at most one and a half miles long. It was not anything to write home about. Archeologists will tell us it was built in just over fifty days, and the quality of workmanship was not great. It was not a "great work" in the eyes of Babylon, who could boast of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon as one of the great wonders of the world; and even the winter residence of the prince of Babylon, or the prince of the Persians, was something to write home about. You see, in Nehemiah's eyes the building of this wall, putting one stone upon another, was something that was being done for God. God was in this work, and he wasn't about to leave it. How could he possibly leave this great work and go and meet with these people?

You see, what we have here are two worldviews in collision, and Nehemiah knows that. Nehemiah is a man of God, and these three men, Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem, are not. I couldn't help but think of something that we cited in our staff meeting, as it fell this year on October 31, the day we commemorate Luther's great nailing of the 95 Theses to the castle church door at Wittenberg in 1517. Four years later at the Diet of Worms, he would say those great words:

"Unless I am convinced by Holy Scripture and by good reason, my conscience is bound. It isn't safe or expedient for me to deny my conscience. Here I stand; I can do no other, so help me God."

Well, there's something of that spirit in Nehemiah. He can't leave this work, because this is God's work.

II. The attempt of innuendo.

Well, there's a second attempt, and it's an attempt at innuendo. Nehemiah was right. He sounded hawkish, but he was right to distrust these men because on the fifth invitation it comes accompanied by a letter...a letter that says in no uncertain terms that the Jews, led by Nehemiah, are plotting...they are plotting a *coup d'état*; they are plotting an overthrow of Persian rule in Jerusalem, that's the real reason for building this wall. There's talk, you see, among the prophets of Jerusalem that a king is coming and perhaps that he has already come. And that king is Nehemiah. You are the king! They are setting you up as a king in defiance of Artaxerxes the king of Persia, and you know, he will get to hear about it! (You understand what that means: we will tell him about it.) They're bullies, and more than that, they are guilty of outright lies. He's the victim of a lying tongue. They're telling lies about him.

It's a fearful thing to be a leader in any capacity, whether in civilian life or in church life. It's a fearful thing these days to be a leader of any description, because folk will tell lies. And once people hear those lies, some of them will believe it no matter what you say. No matter how you protest your innocence, somebody is going to believe those lies. Some, no doubt, believe these lies. Seeds of doubt were being sown among the people in Jerusalem: what is Nehemiah's ambition here?

You know the story of Oliver Cromwell, of course, in the 1640's. Great leader. One of the greatest of leaders. But in the 1650's, he lost his head. He would become king himself. John Owen, the great Puritan and his personal parson, dissolved his fellowship with Oliver Cromwell. Is that what's going on here with Nehemiah? Some folk might even begin to believe that. What do you do, you see, when you're the victim of lies?

He prays to God. Did you note that? In verse 9: "But now, O God, strengthen my hands." Strengthen my hands; come to my aid. Like so many of the Psalms that speak — Psalm 131, Psalm 109 — the psalmist is the victim of lies. A whispering campaign. They're on the telephone and they're saying things about you that are just not true. That's a terrible position to be in. It's an awful position to be in. It happens in the church — it does, you know it does. And sometimes all you can do is say, "Lord, You know my heart. Strengthen my hands." He's a great leader. He was a great leader.

III. The attempt by enemies within.

Well, there's a third attempt, and it comes from within. He's invited to the house of Shemaiah. Shemaiah apparently is a prophet of some kind. For some reason he's confined to his house, and Nehemiah goes to visit him. And this man Shemaiah says to him, 'We have to go to the temple. We've got to run there right

now. We've got to go to the innermost part of the temple and close the doors because men are coming to kill you, and they're coming tonight.' Imagine! Can you imagine being Nehemiah for a minute? What do you do? This is a man of God; this is a prophet; this is a spokesman of God, and he's saying we've got to run to the temple because murderers are coming to get you, and they're coming tonight.

There were several things about that that...Nehemiah smelt a rat. There are some things...I can change the metaphor: there was something fishy about what he was saying. First of all, how come he's confined to his house and he can run to the temple with Nehemiah? Secondly, there's no such thing as sanctuary within the temple. Never was. Now we're familiar with stories, for example, of our friends in the Roman Catholic Church sometimes using their building as a sanctuary for illegal aliens in California — for example. Stories of that nature have occurred in the news and press in recent months and years. But there was no such doctrine in the Old Testament. It just wasn't true. And thirdly, he wasn't allowed in that part of the temple. Only a priest could go into that part of the temple. How could he go in there and not die? There were three things wrong. Three strikes. He will not do it. He cannot do it. It would be in violation of the Law. It would be in violation of what God has expressly written in His word, and in any case, what do you think the people in Jerusalem would say if they saw Nehemiah running through the streets, heading into the temple and slamming the doors behind him? What kind of leader is he?

He's a man of courage. He's a man of extraordinary courage. He's being attacked here three times, one after another.

You know, my favorite story about courage is my dear friend, Sam Patterson, the first president of RTS. I met him in 1976. He was the main speaker at the Banner of Truth Conference in Leicester, and he had just been preaching in London. Nineteen-seventy-six was a period of economic difficulties, and the government at that time had been urging the people to be courageous, to have hope. And he had noticed in London these huge, huge billboards that simply said "Take Courage," and he was encouraged by that, and told a congregation in London that he was encouraged by it. What a wonderful thing that was, to be encouraged, and to take courage. And he noticed that people were giggling, because "Courage" was a beer. And this is one of the great beer companies advertising "take Courage!"

Nehemiah is a man of great courage as a leader. This is a story, you understand...this is a story about a leader who is under attack. That's why you need to pray for your leaders. You need to pray for those in leadership in the church every day. You need to covenant to pray for them, because they're under attack. Satan would just love to see a leader fall and collapse. Imagine! If Satan gets a little minnow here to fall and collapse, what is that? But if he can get a leader to fall, splashed in the banner headlines of newspapers and on CNN for

days interminable — “this great leader has fallen...” You need to pray for leaders, for their discernment, for their wisdom, their courage. When you stand against the tide, when you stand against the culture, when you insist that same-sex marriage is wrong, when you insist that abortion is wrong, you will be ostracized and vilified, and you’ll be called a bigot, and unloving and ungracious.

But there's one more thing. Right at the end, 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...” [there was more than just one in Jerusalem] “...who wanted to make me afraid.”

What is that? It sounds, doesn't it, as if it's got to him a little. Doesn't it? It's got to him a little. It's got under his skin a little. Sounds just a little bit irritable, don't you think? “Remember these enemies” — and there's something of an imprecation here. What he's saying in effect is ‘Do to them as they deserve. Don't show them mercy here. Don't be nice to them. Don't be kind to them. Give them what they deserve.’

Some of you were in my class this morning in Jeremiah. In chapter 18 we were dealing with a very similar passage. Jeremiah is calling upon God not to forgive his enemies' sins. I'm not sure what to make of it, to be honest. I suspect...I suspect that Nehemiah is showing here something of his true colors. He's a sinner like the rest of us. I'm so glad that passages like this are found in the Bible. You know, even if we say this evening — and some of us just might say - ‘Nehemiah, you weren't altogether right in that prayer. Maybe there should have been just an element of grace in your prayer.’ Perhaps that's where we are tonight. You know, maybe some of you have no problems with the prayer at all; that's fine. That's fine! But some of you may just have a little bit of a problem with that prayer, and you say, ‘Well, why didn't he ask for the Lord to save them? You know, to bring them to Jesus?’

I'm so glad that prayer is there, because there are times, dear friends, when I've thought exactly like that. You're the victim of lies, you're the victim of innuendo, you're the victim of personal attacks, and every instinct within your body wants to say, “Lord, deal with these people, and don't show them mercy!” That may be wrong. It may well be wrong. And from a New Testament perspective, it certainly is wrong. I'm still glad it's there, because it says to me I'm not alone, and there are great, great men like Nehemiah and like Jeremiah who fell in this way, too. And God still owned them, and God still blessed them, and God still strengthened them.

So pray for your leaders, will you? Before you go to bed tonight, pray for our leaders in this church tonight before you go to bed. Pray for leaders — well, we're just before an election — whoever that leader may be, but especially in the church...especially in the church, who are the targets and victims of Satan's rage

and venom, that they might be able to stand in the evil day, having put on the belt of truth and the breastplate of righteousness, and their feet ready in preparation for the gospel of peace, and the shield of faith and the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Let's pray together.

Lord our God, we thank You for Nehemiah. We thank You for his courage, tenacity, his insight, his wisdom, his discernment, his unflinching commitment to pursue Your glory no matter what. Lord, we need such men. We need them right now. We need them today. We need them in the church. We need them here. We pray for those in leadership in this church; we pray for Ligon, especially. Lord, keep them from the evil one. Keep them strong, keep them committed, keep them looking to You. Keep them gospel-focused. Keep them with that principal aim to do everything for the glory of God. And watch over us, every single one of us, we pray. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

Please stand and receive the Lord's benediction.

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