

BUILD MY LIFE

"BAIT AND SWITCH"

NEHEMIAH 6:1-7:3

Rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem to realize an Old Covenant vision was a team effort. Likewise, obeying Christ's Great Commission to realize a New Covenant vision is also a team effort, faithfulness being an essential ingredient in both—faithfulness on the part of the team leader as well as every member on the team. Of course, the best way to immobilize a team is to neutralize its leader. As one writer observes: "In any great work of God the leaders are strategic; the enemy, whether human or satanic, will try to cause the leader to fall, lose credibility, or disappear altogether" (Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, NAC, 209-10). When work on the walls reached a critical stage, all else having failed, Sanballat and his malevolent allies decided that stopping the work would mean stopping Nehemiah. So to abort the project they decided to murder the leader. But this effort failed, too.

This Week's Core Competency

Faithfulness – I have established a good name with God and with others based on my long-term loyalty to that relationship.

Leadership . . . some are born with it and others have a knack for it, some have a gift for it and others hold a position with it. We all exercise it from time to time either formally or informally. After all, leadership is just influence of a certain sort, which suggests that we're all leaders more or less. And as leaders we all run the risks and face the challenges common to leaders. Take Nehemiah, for example; he was an extraordinary leader who faced extraordinary

Satan through his agents, devilish and human, assaults all Christians, and leaders, it seems, most fiercely.

– J. I. Packer

challenges. J. I. Packer describes eloquently the challenge facing all leaders in his comments on "leaders as targets."

"In Satan's war on the saints and on the church, the war in which temptation is his method and destruction his immediate goal, it is a rather grim law that the higher one's exposure and the greater one's influence as a leader of others, the more one's personal standards and political wisdom will be put under attack. It is obvious that disgracing or distracting the leader is an excellent way of daunting, holding back, or otherwise sidelining the followers. Leaders have something of a Pied Piper quality: they are thought of as wise and farseeing, and people trust their judgment and follow in their steps; so if they can be allured into bypaths and blind alleys, they will take many with them, and Satan will score heavily. Also leaders live in something of a goldfish bowl, so that when leadership scandals break, the damage and discouragement will be large-scale and widespread. In the New Testament, Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus, which we call the Pastorals because their theme is the pastoral leader's role, concentrate not on skills to learn but on the qualities of zeal, goodness, steadiness, and wisdom that the leader must maintain and model. This is because Paul is so conscious of 'the devil's trap' (1 Tim. 3:7; 2 Tim. 2:26) set for those who lead. Nehemiah's story, as we have seen, abundantly illustrates his point.

"Spiritual warfare involves all Christians, and the classic passage (Eph. 6:10-18) in which Paul speaks in infantry-man's terms of the resources God gives for this conflict is addressed to believers as such. Clearly, though, it has a special relevance for leaders. How necessary it is for a leader to have 'the belt of truth buckled round your waist'-the 'truth' here being the revealed truth of God in the Scriptures generally and in the gospel of Christ particularly. How important it

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is that a leader should have 'the breastplate of righteousness in place'—'righteousness' here signifying what Paul elsewhere calls 'good works,' that is, uprightness and integrity of life in covenant with God. How vital it is, too, that a leader should have 'feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace'—'readiness' here meaning maneuverability, the capacity to run, jump, adjust, and quickly change one's position, or else stand firm, poised, balanced, and ready to counter-attack, according to what the enemy's action requires. How crucial it is that a leader should be carrying and using 'the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one'—these 'arrows' being thoughts that embody doubt, despair, unbelief, misbelief, self-pity, irresponsibility, bitterness against God, and malice against people. How indispensable it is that a leader should have his head protected by 'the helmet of salvation'—'salvation' here meaning conscious, assured enjoyment of loving fellowship with Jesus the Saviour—and his hand wielding 'the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God'—'sword' meaning here that with which you drive the enemy away, as Jesus drove Satan away in the desert by quoting from the Law of Moses on true godliness and committing himself to live by the words he cited" (*A Passion for Faithfulness*, 134-36).

Satan paints a big red bull's-eye on the backs of Christian leaders. He knows that he can frustrate mission accomplishment if he can take out strategic leaders devoted to the cause. Nehemiah's single-minded commitment to his mission, his cunning insight into the wiles of his enemies, and his dogged determination to not be sidetracked provides an example for all leaders to follow.

day 1 ENCOUNTER – read God's word to put yourself in touch with him.

Nehemiah 6:1-7:3

1 When word came to Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall and not a gap was left in it—though up to that time I had not set the doors in the gates— 2 Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message: "Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono."

But they were scheming to harm me; 3 so I sent messengers to them with this reply: "I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?" 4 Four times they sent me the same message, and each time I gave them the same answer.

5 Then, the fifth time, Sanballat sent his aide to me with the same message, and in his hand was an unsealed letter 6 in which was written:

"It is reported among the nations—and Geshem says it is true—that you and the Jews are plotting to revolt, and therefore you are building the wall. Moreover, according to these reports you are about to become their king 7 and have even appointed prophets to make this proclamation about you in Jerusalem: 'There is a king in Judah!' Now this report will get back to the king; so come, let us meet together."

8 I sent him this reply: "Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head."

9 They were all trying to frighten us, thinking, "Their hands will get too weak for the work, and it will not be completed."

But I prayed, "Now strengthen my hands."

10 One day I went to the house of Shemaiah son of Delaiah, the son of Mehetabel, who was shut in at his home. He said, "Let us meet in the house of God, inside the temple, and let us close the temple doors, because men are coming to kill you—by night they are coming to kill you."

11 But I said, "Should a man like me run away? Or should someone like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go!" 12 I realized that God had not sent him, but that he had prophesied against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. 13 He had been hired to intimidate me so that I would commit a sin by doing this, and then they would give me a bad name to discredit me.

14 Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, my God, because of what they have done; remember also the prophet Noadiah and how she and the rest of the prophets have been trying to intimidate me. 15 So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days.

16 When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God.

17 Also, in those days the nobles of Judah were sending many letters to Tobiah, and replies from Tobiah kept coming to them. 18 For many in Judah were under oath to him, since he was son-in-law to Shekariah son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam son of Berekiah. 19 Moreover, they kept reporting to me his good deeds and then telling him what I said. And Tobiah sent letters to intimidate me.

7:1 After the wall had been rebuilt and I had set the doors in place, the gatekeepers, the musicians and the Levites were appointed. 2 I put in charge of Jerusalem my brother Hanani, along with Hananiah the commander of the citadel, because he was a man of integrity and feared God more than most people do. 3 I

said to them, "The gates of Jerusalem are not to be opened until the sun is hot. While the gatekeepers are still on duty, have them shut the doors and bar them. Also appoint residents of Jerusalem as guards, some at their posts and some near their own houses."

EXAMINE – what the passage says before you decide what it means.

- * Circle the names of characters in the narrative, e.g., "Sanballat," "Geshem," etc. in vv. 1-19.
- * Highlight sinister words e.g., "harm," "frighten," "intimidate," etc., in vv. 1-19.
- * Underline "the plain of Ono" in v. 2.
- * Box "but" indicating *contrast* in vv. 2, 9, 11, 12.
- * Circle "unsealed letter" in v. 5.
- * Underline accusations against Nehemiah in vv. 6, 7.
- * Bracket "shut in at his home" in v. 10.
- * Circle "sin" in v. 13.
- * Bracket "until the sun is hot" in 7:3.

day **2** EXPLORE – the answer to these questions to better understand what the passage means.

Consult the explanation of the message and the notes to follow if you need help.

1. Sanballat and Geshem request a meeting with Nehemiah (v. 2). What makes you think they are up to no good?
2. Nehemiah turns down their invitation *four* times (v. 4). What do you find *exemplary* in his response?
3. Then they send him an "unsealed letter" (v. 5). What do infer from that?
4. The letter is filled with false accusations and thinly veiled threats (vv. 6-7). How so?
5. Again, Nehemiah refuses to confer with them (v. 8). What do you find *exemplary* in his response this time?
6. Finally, they hire a prophet to prophesy against him (vv. 10, 12). Put the point of his prophecy in your own words.
7. List the *reasons* Nehemiah gives for refusing Shemaiah's advice (vv. 11, 13).

8. Nehemiah doesn't fall for this ploy either. What do you find *exemplary* in his response this final time?

9. Nehemiah's enemies seemed to know what he was up to all along and vice versa. How so? (See vv. 17-19)

10. **Discussion:** Talk about the *lower* story, which involves Nehemiah's response to the enemies of God's work, and its relevance to us.

day 3 **EXAMINE** – an explanation of the message to better understand the meaning of the passage.

Nehemiah and the Jews completed rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem even though they were surrounded by angry powerful opponents. Sanballat, the governor of Samaria, opposed them to the north. Tobiah the Ammonite opposed them to the east. Gesham the Arab opposed them to the south, and when the men of Ashdod heard that the gaps in Jerusalem's wall were being closed, they joined in the alliance to oppose them from the east. The Jews who lived near their angry neighbors were not exaggerating when they repeatedly told Nehemiah and the others at work in Jerusalem, "Wherever you turn, they will attack us" (4:12). Nevertheless, the people continued to work. They neither discounted the threats, nor did they permit themselves to be intimidated by them. Instead they worked even harder, defended themselves against their adversaries' threats, and remembered the Lord.

But once the rebuilding neared completion, Nehemiah's enemies devised more desperate devices to use against him. First, they tried to eliminate him. "Nehemiah's work was progressing beyond their expectations. So they had to make fresh plans as to how to stop the work. The only possibility was to remove the person who had been responsible for the whole project. They decided to lure him to a place of their choice and to eliminate him" (F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, NICOT, 199). They invited him to a top-level meeting of political leaders to be held in one of the small villages on the plain of Ono (v. 2). On the surface it appeared that all they wanted was to negotiate a lasting peace, and the place to do that was on politically neutral ground halfway between Jerusalem and Samaria. "The apparent recognition of Nehemiah's success was flattering, and the invitation to work out a way of living together sounded advantageous and alluring.

Flattery and fancied advantage have always made a potent combination for turning people's heads; in business and in politics, unwary folk are having their judgment deflected by such means all the time. But Nehemiah's head was not turned, as his reply to the invitation shows" (J. I. Packer, *A Passion for Faithfulness*, 128).

"Thanks, but no thanks" Nehemiah replied. "I've got more important things to do" (v. 3). But his foes wouldn't take "no" for an answer. Four times they invited Nehemiah to their summit meeting, and four times Nehemiah refused their invitation. He could see right through them!

And so, when they couldn't *eliminate* him, they tried to *intimidate* him. Sanballat dispatched his henchman, Geshem, with an "unsealed letter" containing a thinly veiled accusation there for everyone to read. The accusation was the same one leveled at Nehemiah before. Sanballat accused him of rebelling against the king (2:19). To support that accusation, Geshem's letter pointed out that Nehemiah had rebuilt the wall; moreover, it was widely rumored that he was about to have himself appointed king by prophets whom he had already selected. Sooner or later news of his treason would reach the king of Persia, which made coming together to confer absolutely necessary.

"Nothing like what you are saying is happening," Nehemiah replied. "You are just making it up out of your head" (v. 8). Or as one translation puts it, "Nothing of this sort has occurred; it is a figment of your own imagination" (NJB). Nehemiah knew his enemies were trying to frighten him, so he prayed, "Now strengthen my hands" (v. 9). Clearly, prayers don't have to be long to be effective. One writer comments, "To live peacefully, work steadily, and lead vigorously despite the uncertainty of not knowing

whether Artaxerxes would receive Sanballat's denunciation, and if so whether he would believe it, and if he did, whether or not he would recall Nehemiah for beheading, called for great grace" (Packer, 131).

And so, when they couldn't intimidate him, they tried to discredit him. Tobiah and Sanballat hired a prophet to prophesy against Nehemiah. His name was Shemaiah, and he apparently shut himself in his house to make a point. Just as he had locked himself in his house, so also should Nehemiah lock himself in the temple to escape a number of unnamed thugs who were on their way to kill him—deliberately repeating the words "to kill you" to scare Nehemiah out of his wits. He would be safe in the temple hidden behind locked doors.

But Nehemiah said, "Someone in my position shouldn't run off just to save his skin" (v. 11). Furthermore, he knew it would be a sin for him to enter the temple where only priests were permitted to go, and the consequences of that sin would be devastating. It would discredit him and ruin his good name. Nothing Sanballat and Tobiah tried worked. Nehemiah successfully resisted his enemies' attempts to eliminate, to intimidate, and finally to discredit him, and in the end, "the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days" (v. 15).

Verses 17-19 answer some unanswered questions regarding the intrigue surrounding the events recorded in chapter 6. "This paragraph is not to be regarded as following the preceding two verses in strict chronological order but rather, as the opening words of v 17 make clear ('furthermore throughout that period'), as describing further the kind of intrigues of the period as a whole" (H. G. M. Williamson, *The Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 16, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 255ff), which explains in part how Nehemiah and his enemies remained aware of each other's activities.

According to 7:1-3, having finished the walls, Nehemiah took steps to ensure that the city would remain secure by appointing guards. He appointed two security officers who became responsible for the two halves of the city: his brother "Hanani," and a man named "Hananiah." Now temple worship could flourish (7:1). The gatekeepers usually guarded the temple entrance, but Nehemiah posted them at the city gates because of the imminent danger there. The "man of integrity" (v. 2) was Hananiah, the officer in charge of the men who guarded the city, not Hanani, though he, too, was trustworthy. Hanani's report moved Nehemiah to rebuild Jerusalem's walls; once finished, Nehemiah put his brother in charge of the city.

day **4** **EMBRACE** – how God spoke to you in his word.

The Message of the Passage

Rather than sacrifice your influence, resist your enemies' schemes and persevere in your work until the vision God has given you is realized.

We don't want to be hearers of the word only, but doers of the word as James teaches in James 1:22.

Describe a personal attack in the midst of a "wall-building" experience of your own.

Describe how it affected you and progress on the project.

If you had it to do over again, explain what you would do differently in light of this passage.

notes STUDY – the commentaries to answer the questions.

v. 1 **enemies** See 4:1-21. When the planned attack by their enemies was frustrated, Sanballat and company launched plan B.

v. 2 **plain of Ono** "The Valley of Ono is about twenty-seven miles northwest of Jerusalem . . . Nehemiah's enemies wanted to lure him away from Jewish territory. Valley Ono was for centuries neither Israelite nor Jewish territory. It was probably hostile to the Jews" (Fensham, 200). "It was in a kind of no-man's land between Judah and Samaria. If Nehemiah had accepted this invitation, he would have been many miles from Jerusalem for at least two days. This would have given the people of the land opportunity to attack the Jewish workmen" (Thomas L. Constable, "Notes on Nehemiah," 2019 ed., 35, planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/pdf/nehemiah.pdf).

v. 2 **harm** "How did he know that? Had he a spy system in place? Or was it simply that he put two and two together-his prior knowledge of the men inviting him and his awareness that leopards do not change their spots, plus his sober observation that the Ono plain, a full day's journey from Jerusalem, was on the edge of the hostile territories of Samaria and Ashdod, and his awareness of how easily violence is arranged in villages-and concluded, when he added up these things, that two and two do in fact make four?" (Packer, 128).

v. 5 **unsealed** "The significance of this is much as it would be today: anyone could read it, and therefore Nehemiah would realize that the spotlight of official suspicion was already on him, no matter how unjustified" (Williamson, 255). "The unsealed letter would have been read many times, as indeed it was meant to be, on its journey from Samaria to Jerusalem, and the groundless but very damaging gossip that it contained was already abroad. Perhaps its contents were already on their way to Susa" (Packer, 130).

v. 6 **plotting to revolt** "Sanballat doubtless knew that precisely this charge had been (falsely) made during the attempt to rebuild the walls not so very long before; cf. Ezra 4:7-16. On that occasion, the charge had succeeded in securing an order from the king that the work should cease (vv. 17-22). He may have thought that history could repeat itself in the last resort" (Williamson, 256).

v. 7 **prophets** "The reference to prophets may suggest knowledge of their role as king-makers in pre-exilic times (e.g., Samuel with Saul and David in 1 Sam 9-10 and 16; Nathan's dynastic oracle in 2 Sam 7; Elisha with Jehu in 2 Kgs 9, etc.)" (256).

v. 8 **making it up** The Hebrew term is used only twice in the OT, here and in 1Ki 12:33. "Fabricating' with its unpleasant overtones, seems the best translation. JB translates it aptly in the modern idiom: 'it is a figment of your own imagination'" (Fensham, 203).

v. 10 **Shemaiah** A self-styled prophet for hire, who likely shut himself in his house to "illustrate symbolically that, as he restricted himself to his house, so they had to lock themselves up in the temple" (205).

v. 13 **sin** "Only priests were allowed in the sanctuary (Num 3:10; 18:7). If Nehemiah, not being a priest, entered the temple, he would have desecrated it and brought himself under God's judgment" (Gene A. Getz, "Nehemiah," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, 686). "Nehemiah, had he tried to save himself in such a way, would have lost, possibly, his life, certainly his honour; and would have jeopardized the very cause he had at heart" (Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, TOTC, 109).

v. 15 **fifty-two days** "Elul was the sixth month of the Jewish year, so that the work was finished during the autumn . . . less than six months had passed since Nehemiah first received his commission (cf. 2:1), and the work itself took only fifty-two days . . . Many factors contributed to this astonishing speed, not least the enthusiasm and commitment that Nehemiah's leadership inspired" (Williamson, 260ff).

7:3 **until the sun was hot** "To minimize the threat of potential invaders, Nehemiah ordered that the gates of Jerusalem be open only during the busiest hours of the day (7:3). People had not been living in Jerusalem because it was vulnerable to attack (7:4). The small population rendered it more vulnerable than it would have been with the city full of people. Nehemiah later proposed a plan that would increase the population and consequently the security of Jerusalem (11:1-2)" (Constable, 40).

Family Talk

Encouragement from one parent's heart to another

Fifty-two days-that's how long it took to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem. That doesn't seem like a long time, but imagine fifty-two days of intimidation, lies, slander and fear lobbed in your direction every time you turn around. Fifty-two days of life-threatening opposition with one tactic after another coming your way to break you down and distract you from your calling. Those fifty-two days must have felt like a lifetime. I know that suffering produces perseverance, which leads to character and ultimately hope (Romans 5:3-5), but why does it have to be so difficult and hurt so bad. Parenting can sometimes feel like dodging bullets. We are rolling along, and things are going well when, BAM! the rug is pulled out from under our feet, for example, an unexpected diagnosis, a phone call from the school principal, one of your child's life-long friends suddenly out of the picture because of playground drama. If we have learned one thing from Nehemiah it's the importance of prayer. 1 Thessalonians 5:16 "Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." The biggest and best defense against opposition in parenting is prayer. Can I encourage you to be in prayer for your kids every single day? Be bold, specific and ask the impossible every day. His arm is not too short (Isaiah 59:1) and he is on your side! We are praying for you, too.

What Does The Bible Say

Weekly Verse: Read Neh 6:1-7:3

1. What was Nehemiah's response when Sanballat and his friends tried to trick him?
2. How long did it take to rebuild the wall?
3. Why did Nehemiah choose Hanani and Hananiah to be put in positions of authority?

What Do You Think

Why do you think Sanballat and his friends were still trying to trick Nehemiah?

What R U Going To Do

It's hard to listen to lies when you know the truth. Write down what truth you know about God? Complete this sentence, "God is_____."

Core Comp

Faithfulness - I am loyal to God and others so they know they can count on me.

Memory Verse

Psalm 105:2 – *Sing to Him, sing praise to Him; tell of all His wonderful acts.*

KIDPIX COUPON

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30 CORE COMPETENCIES

10 CORE BELIEFS

Trinity *2 Corinthians 13:14*

I believe the God of the Bible is the only true God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Salvation By Grace *Ephesians 2:8-9*

I believe a person comes into a right relationship with God by His grace, through faith in Jesus Christ.

Authority of the Bible *2 Timothy 3:16-17*

I believe the Bible is the Word of God and has the right to command my belief and action.

Personal God *Psalms 121:1-2*

I believe God is involved in and cares about my daily life.

Identity in Christ *John 1:12*

I believe I am significant because of my position as a child of God.

Church *Ephesians 4:15-16*

I believe the church is God's primary way to accomplish His purposes on earth today.

Humanity *John 3:16*

I believe all people are loved by God and need Jesus Christ as their Savior.

Compassion *Psalms 82:3-4*

I believe God calls all Christians to show compassion to those in need.

Eternity *John 14:1-4*

I believe there is a heaven and a hell and that Jesus Christ is returning to judge the earth and to establish His eternal kingdom.

Stewardship *1 Timothy 6:17-19*

I believe that everything I am or own belongs to God.

10 CORE PRACTICES

Worship *Psalms 95:1-7*

I worship God for who He is and what He has done for me.

Prayer *Psalms 66:16-20*

I pray to God to know Him, to lay my request before Him and to find direction for my daily life.

Bible Study *Hebrews 4:12*

I read the Bible to know God, the truth, and to find direction for my daily life.

Single-mindedness *Matthew 6:33*

I focus on God and His priorities for my life.

Spiritual Gifts *Romans 12:4-6*

I know and use my spiritual gifts to accomplish God's purposes.

Biblical Community *Acts 2:44-47*

I fellowship with other Christians to accomplish God's purposes in my life, others' lives, and in the world.

Giving Away My Time *Colossians 3:17*

I give away my time to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Money

2 Corinthians 8:7

I give away my money to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Faith *Ephesians*

6:19-20

I give away my faith to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Life *Romans 12:1*

I give away my life to fulfill God's purposes.

10 CORE VIRTUES

Joy *John 15:11*

I have inner contentment and purpose in spite of my circumstances.

Peace *Philippians 4:6-7*

I am free from anxiety because things are right between God, myself, and others.

Faithfulness *Proverbs 3:3-4*

I have established a good name with God and with others based on my long-term loyalty to those relationships.

Self-Control *Titus 2:11-13*

I have the power, through Christ, to control myself.

Humility *Philippians 2:3, 4*

I choose to esteem others above myself.

Love *1 John 4:10-12*

I sacrificially and unconditionally love and forgive others.

Patience *Proverbs 14:29*

I take a long time to overheat and endure patiently under the unavoidable pressures of life.

Kindness/Goodness *1 Thess. 5:15*

I choose to do the right things in my relationships with others.

Gentleness *Philippians 4:5*

I am thoughtful, considerate and calm in dealing with others.

Hope *Hebrews 6:19-20*

I can cope with the hardships of life and with death because of the hope I have in Jesus Christ.

About the Authors

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