

Nehemiah: Building a City Within the City, week 9 Diversion and Deception (Nehemiah 6:1–14)

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But now, O God, strengthen my hands.

— Nehemiah 6:9

As God's people were succeeding in rebuilding their city and their church as the city within that city, the opposition to their efforts escalated. With the walls that encircled the city completed and only the hanging of the doors remaining, Nehemiah was singled out for attack because he was the leader. God not only appoints leaders but Satan and his servants oppose them. The guiding principle is that being a godly leader requires a willingness and ability to endure personal attacks, hardship, and loneliness with the kind of wisdom that keeps the mission you are leading from suffering. Having pastored Mars Hill for more than ten years, this chapter of Nehemiah is personally very encouraging because it reveals the hard truth that there is a high cost for leaders to pay personally but we must not become diverted, disgraced, or deceived.

Divert (Nehemiah 6:1–4)

The critics who had opposed Nehemiah's ministry since he first arrived at the city again united. Rather than harshly opposing him, however, it appears that they have had a change of heart—perhaps seeing that Nehemiah's efforts were nearing successful completion they were willing to extend a hand of friendship? After all, they invited Nehemiah to literally meet them halfway in a town between them and himself. At first glance, it seems like Nehemiah should gladly receive their offer because God's people are to practice forgiveness, love, and cooperation.

Showing great God-given wisdom, however, Nehemiah deftly handled this difficult challenge of a murder plot. First, Nehemiah responded with discernment. He rightly understood that they were not seeking his friendship, but rather seeking to divert him from his mission. Second, he understood that taking a few days away from home would come at the cost of finishing his work and he remained doggedly focused on his mission. Third, he repeatedly declined their offer and learned the art of saying no to pushy people no matter how hard or often they push.

Disgrace (Nehemiah 6:5–9)

Upon realizing that their tactic of diverting Nehemiah from his God-given mission was unsuccessful, his enemies escalated their attacks by focusing them on Nehemiah personally. In this, we see that the leader is the one who takes the hardest and most frequent shots because, just as in battle, the shortest route to winning a war is to shoot the highest-ranking officer.

The men who opposed Nehemiah were rather powerful political leaders, which meant that their personal attacks were to be taken as a very serious matter. Because Nehemiah's character was impeccable, his enemies had no

grounds upon which to disgrace his credibility. They resorted to the demonic tactic of creating a horrendous lie. Their lie was that Nehemiah was going to set himself up as king, the exact same lie that would also be promoted about Jesus (Luke 23:1–5). This charge of sedition likely would have resulted in Nehemiah being taken into custody, returned to Susa, and imprisoned or even put to death. The mission of building the church and the city would have ground to a halt just prior to completion, which meant that Nehemiah was left with a difficult decision to persevere in his mission or preserve his life.

Making this lie all the more dangerous was the fact that it was communicated in an open legal letter. It was customary in that day for documents to be sealed so that they could only be read by the intended recipient. By sending an open letter, Nehemiah's enemies were publicly and openly circulating the lie, akin to a falsified smear campaign in our own day with lies promulgated through email chains, blogs, press releases, and media interviews. With the benefits of free speech come the burdens of unchecked lies with made-up sources to appear credible, like what happened to Nehemiah. While Christian leaders must be held accountable for sin, that sin must in fact be real and be founded on more than innuendo, lies, and gossip.

Again, rather than allowing his enemies to divert or disgrace him, Nehemiah responded with great wisdom. First, he simply refuted the charges as lies. Second, he rightly attacked their motives as nothing more than politically motivated fear tactics. Third, he prayed to God for strength for him and his people to finish their task and press forward with their mission, trusting God to keep him from personal destruction.

Deceive (Nehemiah 6:10–14)

Despite their failed efforts to divert and disgrace Nehemiah, his enemies persisted in what was obviously a stressful and exhausting season for Nehemiah. They actually used his faith in God as a means by which to destroy his obedience to the God he loved. A “prophet” who claimed to speak for God called Nehemiah into a meeting in his home and then gave a “prophecy” to Nehemiah. Its content was that Nehemiah would be killed at night and God wanted him to flee to the Temple to hide for safety. This “prophet” was nothing more than a false prophet and was much like the seemingly endless parade of hyper-spiritual people who presume to speak on God's behalf but fail to speak from the Holy Spirit and in so doing contradict God's previously revealed words of prophecy known as Scripture (Micah 3:11).

Knowing Scripture well, Nehemiah was able to immediately discern that the false prophet was a liar not sent by God but rather hired by his enemies to speak for them and ultimately Satan. We see that just because someone is spiritual or has even been greatly used by God, what they say must not be immediately accepted but rather confirmed by Scripture (Deuteronomy 13:1–5; 18:20–22; Isaiah 8:20; Romans 4:3).

Scripture clearly forbade a man like Nehemiah, who was not a priest, from entering the Temple like the false prophet had commanded. The penalty for such an act was death (Numbers 18:7), and King Uzziah was only given leprosy in God's mercy for doing just that (2 Chronicles 26:16–21).

Jesus (Matthew 7:15; 24:11, 24), Paul (Acts 20:29–31), and John (1 John 4:1) all promised that false prophets would come just as they had in the days of the Old Testament. The presence of false prophets in every age suggests that the people of God must always distinguish the true from the false prophets by testing all teaching by Scripture (e.g., Acts 17:11).

Nehemiah's final response to the attempts to divert, disgrace, and deceive him are very exemplary. First, he did not lose courage but remained devoted to his mission despite what were undoubtedly long, stress-filled days. Second, he practiced theological discernment and was not dissuaded by false spiritual appeals that contradicted Scripture. Third, he continually went to God in prayer, asking that he would be empowered to finish his task and that God would deal justly with his enemies for their many sins. Nehemiah rightly took the long view of things, understanding that, in the end, God does indeed have a day of judgment for every person; until that day we must not only labor for justice but also wait patiently because God alone must deal with some people who refuse to repent.

Lastly, Nehemiah was able to persevere in the face of constant trial despite the fact that he apparently had no wife, no friend, no comforter, no encourager, and no relief from the pressure of his task. Indeed, Nehemiah was a desperate pray-er and walked with God with greater ongoing intimacy than most people (one of the curious blessings of the loneliness of leadership) simply because he had to. A leader learns that while many joys and pleasures are taken from them (e.g., sleep, a simple life, rest, safety, security, anonymity, encouragement, friendship), God kindly gives Himself to them as their greatest treasure.

Next week: Nehemiah 6:15–7:4