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“Dealing with Distractions” – Nehemiah 6:1-16

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○ What are you attracted to? Ask a bee, and it's any flower. Ask an Olympian and its gold. Ask a young, engaged lady, and it's her fiancée. But just as there are things that we are attracted to, there are also things that distract us from those things. This morning we're looking at “Dealing with Distractions.” ○

As Christians we recognise that Satan is very much alive and active in our world, but that we are safe within the shelter of our Almighty God. Nevertheless, the Devil continues to work to oppose, distract and disrupt the work of God.

Last week Kate shared from chapters 4 and 5 and we saw how the rebuilding of the city walls around Jerusalem met with opposition that came from both without and within; governors of neighbouring areas, and from mistreatment within the Hebrew people, creating disunity and disharmony.

The Devil is relentless in his attacks. He never gives up. If he can't disrupt the work from without or within, then he'll attack the leaders. And in chapter 6 we see just this. If you can hit the leader hard enough; if you can take down the shepherd, then the sheep will scatter.

And so, behind the work and words of Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem, was the work and words of Satan himself. I wonder how much pleasure he took in the exile of the Hebrew people – did he too see the nation of Israel as dead and buried?

Did he view the “chosen people of God” as defeated and bearing an ineffective witness to their God, to their surrounding nations? And so he is more than keen to see the walls remain torn down; to keep the Hebrew people in a subservient position.

Now, as we look at chapter 6 we'll see three ways through which Nehemiah is attacked, and you might see how these have occurred in your life or in other churches. But be aware too, that these same tactics may be the very tactics that we employ ourselves. We might feel attacked at times, but we may also be the attacker.

And so, we come to chapter 6. The surrounding peoples have heard that the walls are almost complete – already! It's nearly time for the ribbon cutting ceremony. The walls have been completed and there's just the doors to be finished and hung in the gateways. Again, we can't be too sure as to the underlying motivation behind the opposition, except that the Evil One is alive and actively working against God. ○ And so we read from v.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 - 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; 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?” Four times they sent me the same message, and each time I gave them the same answer.”** (6:1-4)

This first distraction is through the way of a deterrent. They sought to **deter** Nehemiah from finishing the job. ○ Ono was 30-40 kms from Jerusalem - somewhat central in location, and the suggestion was that the leaders or governors of their regions get together for a chin wag. Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem were not privy to the favourable place that Nehemiah had with the King, and were concerned for their region as it appeared that the Hebrew people were creating the potential for confrontation. They no doubt wanted to slow the progress of the construction and cease its completion, by getting Nehemiah on side. But quite possibly if they were not successful, then bring some harm to him whilst he was away from his city and his people. They sought to deter Nehemiah from completing his task.

So, Satan seeks to deter us from that which good, and that which we are called to do. Distractions come in all shapes and forms, designed to deter us from what is best. It can be through an area of sin that we tolerate. The Devil has a foothold into a weakness of ours, and keeps chiselling away until it becomes a stronghold – deterring us from that which is good.

It can be a love for another interest or pursuit that may even be a good thing, but is not the main thing. It can be as simple as turning on the computer and checking emails; or Facebook; playing games on your iPhone; deterring us from spending time with God.

Dorothy Haskins shares a tip that she learnt from a brilliant violinist. She said, “There are many things that used to demand my time. When I went to my room after breakfast, I made my bed, straightened the room, dusted, and did whatever else seemed necessary. When I finished my work, I turned to my violin practice. That system prevented me from accomplishing what I could on the violin. So, I reversed things. I deliberately planned to neglect everything else until my practice time was complete. And that program of planned neglect brought my success.” (A Practical Guide to Prayer)

It seems to me that for many of us, we need ‘planned neglect’. ○ We need to drop that which is not important; to know where our priorities are and stick with them; to determine to do the important things first. And Nehemiah deliberately ignored what they were suggesting. It was a deliberate choice that he made. Nehemiah planned to neglect their offer to come to Ono. He said “Oh No! I’ll ignored their invitation,” four times. He was not going to forsake a great work for anything less.

I wonder, is there something that has been distracting you from God, from doing His will? Can you plan or determine to neglect that thing? What do you think are God’s priorities for your life? What are you allowing to derail you from God’s agenda? What do you need to plan to neglect?

The second form of distraction for Nehemiah came by way of defamation; they sought to **defame** him. ○ V.5, **“Then, the fifth time, Sanballat sent his aide to me with the same message, and in his hand was an unsealed letter 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 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.”**

○ I sent him this reply: **“Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head.” They were all trying to frighten us, thinking, “Their hands will get too weak for the work, and it will not be completed.” (v5-9)**

So, on the 5th occasion Sanballat sent an unsealed letter; that is an open letter, designed for everyone to read, basically telling the world that Nehemiah was plotting a revolt and planning to make himself the King of Judah. ○

Sanballat wanted it widely known that it appeared that the building of the walls was so that they could rebel against the Persian Empire, and so that Nehemiah could set himself up as the king of the Hebrew people; thereby committing treason. Surely this should upset the Hebrew people; wondering whether Nehemiah had hidden motives and that they couldn't and shouldn't trust him.

Surely this should cause Nehemiah to stop building and come and talk terms with the surrounding governors. But of course, their accusations were untrue; having no basis whatsoever. They set about trying to defame Nehemiah.

Now we've all heard that “Where's there's smoke there's fire.” Physically that might be the case. But how many of us have made that statement when we've heard some gossip? We've heard certain stories and we've put two and two together and come up with five, but we tend to believe it because, “where's there's smoke there's always fire.”

Unfortunately, there's no way to combat lies and slander; when people set about trying to defame us, spreading lies and gossip. Nehemiah knows that there is no point trying to argue his case, except to say that it's untrue. He understands their motives, but doesn't lower himself into their game. He knows that if he does all things with integrity, then God will look after the rest. If we are people of integrity and take care of our character, then God will take care of our reputation. The things that do destroy us are not gossip and rumours, but our character. So, we live our lives seeking to honour God and do what is best for one another.

Thirdly, and finally they sought to **discredit** Nehemiah through the prophet Shemaiah. ○ V.10, **“One day I went to the house of Shemaiah 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.”**

○ **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!” I realized that God had not sent him, but that he had prophesied against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. 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.” (v.10-13)**

Evidently, Shemaiah was a recognized prophet; claimed to be “shut in” – probably due to a time of fasting and prayer, but with “a word” for Nehemiah. The gist of which, was that Nehemiah's enemies were sending assassins to kill him. So, he should hide himself within the Temple where they would not dare enter.

This appalled Nehemiah for two reasons. First at the thought that he should hide himself away like a coward, and second at the thought that he should defile the Temple; for all but the priest was forbidden to enter the Temple. ○ This then was an attempt to discredit him on both grounds; that of being a coward, and by dishonouring God.

Once again, we see the attacks from the Evil One come veiled in what would, on the surface appear to be a good idea, and justified by following it through. Why not protect oneself from a probable threat? As you and I face varying situations in life we too may consider things to be OK or even good, but do we honour God by following them through? If the Devil can discredit us in the eyes of others; workmates, neighbours, even family, then he will attempt to do so.

But there are times; out of envy or jealousy that we may also seek to discredit others. We need to be careful to watch our motives and seek to honour God at all times.

And so people around us will seek to deter us, defame us, and discredit us. Satan seeks to deter us, defame us, and discredit us. He seeks to deter, defame and discredit the work of the church. He seeks to deter, defame and discredit the work of Jesus, and His Name.

But as we remain faithful as did Nehemiah, the Lord blessed and completed his work.  V.15, **“So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days.”** Nehemiah then said, **“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.”** (v.15-16)

Remaining faithful to the Lord; seeking to honour Him, did just that; it honoured Him. The surrounding nations recognised that God was behind their success; Judah had a great God.

We often consider opposition from the Devil as an attack, and we don't like to be attacked. But perhaps we're better off if we see these attacks through different eyes; they're simply a distraction; an attempt to distract us from remaining faithful to our Lord. Nehemiah met a number of distractions, and he prayed – v.9.  As a result, God helped, v.16. Once again, we see the link between prayer and God's assistance.

Distractions come to us in many forms, but let us be like Nehemiah and seek the Lord in prayer, and to honour Him in all things, then He will be glorified as a result.

How do you avoid distraction, - by your concerted “attraction.” A young lady will not be distracted by any fellow she meets whilst she remains attracted to her fiancée. Who is your focus; your attraction? Is it the Lord? Like the bee seeking the flower, are we seeking the Lord?

When we are attacked, these attacks simply become, distractions as we pray, putting our trust in God, and relying upon His assistance. How many of us can testify to the goodness of God as He has answered our prayers? If you are being distracted and discouraged at the moment, can I encourage you to come to the Lord in prayer, and trust in Him to take care of you.

Song: TN270 Cornerstone