

**“Nehemiah the Hedgehog”**  
**Nehemiah 6-7**  
**September 13, 2020**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

In his book, *Good to Great*, Jim Collins tells the story of the hedgehog and the fox. The cunning fox is always scheming on how he might catch the slow hedgehog. Collins writes:

The fox is a cunning creature, able to devise a myriad of complex strategies for sneak attacks upon the hedgehog...Fast, sleek, beautiful, fleet of foot, and crafty—the fox looks like the sure winner. The hedgehog, on the other hand, is a dowdier creature, looking like a genetic mix-up between a porcupine and a small armadillo. He waddles along, going about his simple day, searching for lunch and taking care of his home. The fox waits in cunning silence at the juncture in the trail. The hedgehog, minding his own business, wanders right into the path of the fox. “Aha, I’ve got you now!” thinks the fox. He leaps out, bounding across the ground, lightning fast. The little hedgehog, sensing danger, looks up and thinks, “Here we go again. Will he ever learn?” Rolling up into a perfect little ball, the hedgehog becomes a sphere of sharp spikes, pointing outward in all directions. The fox, bounding toward his prey, sees the hedgehog defense and calls off the attack.

Nehemiah reminds me of the hedgehog. He is attacked relentlessly by his enemies, enduring seemingly unending strategies to stop him from his work to build up Jerusalem, its walls and its people. He responds to every attempt of his enemies in the same way. He prays and he keeps working. Like Nehemiah, we are not unfamiliar with attacks from enemies. We can learn from him to be like the hedgehog, employing a defense that works every time.

**I. Relentless and Cunning Enemies**

Our chapter opens with the return of three enemies we have already encountered: Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem. They are powerful governors from surrounding regions, all of whom had benefitted from Israel’s weakness and all of whom wanted Israel to remain weak. Their previous efforts to stop the rebuilding of Jerusalem had failed, but they do not give up. This latest attempt begins with what appears to be a reasonable request for Nehemiah to meet with them. “Let’s have a summit and talk out our differences.” But we are told that their real purpose was far more malevolent than a mere meeting. **“They intended to do me harm”** (v. 2). We’re not told how Nehemiah became aware of their intentions to assassinate him. Perhaps a friend or ally became aware of their plans and informed Nehemiah. Or maybe he simply assumed their evil intent by a wise and discerning spirit. In either case, he refused out of a sense of the importance of the work to which God had called him.

The relentless nature of these enemies can be seen in the fact that they made this same request four times. They embraced the battering ram technique of persuasion, hoping that repeated requests would eventually weaken Nehemiah's resolve. Their hopes were not realized as Nehemiah remained resolute.

Their next effort was still aimed at persuading Nehemiah to agree to a meeting. This effort involved a serious accusation contained in an open letter. The open letter meant that this accusation would be made visible to everyone. The accusation was that Jerusalem was making preparations to rebel against Persia and that Nehemiah was plotting to become Israel's next king. I notice that the accusation is introduced with the kind of vagueness that often accompanies falsehoods. "It is reported that..." The danger of such accusations is that they introduce a thought in the minds of people that is hard to get rid of. That is especially the case if there is some truth mixed in with the falsehood, as was the case here. They were building a wall, and Nehemiah was functioning in a king-like manner. Nehemiah responds that the accusation is completely false, mere inventions of their own minds.

Have you ever been falsely accused of something? If you have, you know that your strong instinct is to answer the accusation and set the record straight. As you plan your defense carefully in your mind, you grow more and more eager to set the record straight. This instinct would grow even stronger if the accusation itself was serious, which this one certainly was. Rebellion against Persia would be answered by the strongest possible response from the Persian army. Amazingly, though, Nehemiah doesn't give in at all to this instinct to meet with his accusers in order to set the record straight. He simply denies it and moves on.

In verse 9, I detect a scheme of Satan that is behind all this opposition. **"For they wanted to frighten us, thinking, 'Their hands will drop from the work, and it will not be done.'**" This theme of fear is mentioned three times in this chapter. Satan knows of the damaging effects of fear in our lives, the way it sidelines us in our work for the Lord. He will take every possible opportunity to make us afraid. If Nehemiah thought that this false accusation was his biggest enemy, he would have ended up fighting the wrong battle. Instead, he rightly realized that fear was his biggest enemy, so he resorted to his really big guns in attacking that fear, the nuclear weapon of prayer. Similarly, if we misidentify our enemy today as merely some political view that is contrary to biblical principles, we will be fighting the wrong battle. The fight against fear is the battle we need to be fighting. Or to word that more positively, the fight to trust God instead of giving way to fear is where our efforts should be focused.

Another enemy shows up in verse 10. Nehemiah had refused to meet with the three governors, but he doesn't refuse to meet with a prophet by the name

of Shemaiah. The meeting is in Shemaiah's house, and the message contains two points. Point one is that Nehemiah's enemies plan to sneak up on him and kill him at night. Point two is that Nehemiah should take action to protect himself against this threat. Shemaiah counsels him to take refuge in the temple. When Nehemiah hears that counsel, he concludes that Shemaiah is a false prophet who had been hired by Tobiah and Sanballat. True prophets don't promote fear, and they don't counsel actions that violate the Scriptures. Only priests were allowed into the inner parts of the temple, and Nehemiah was not a priest. That's why he says that it would be sinful for him to do this.

The relentless nature of the opposition faced by Nehemiah is made evident in the final paragraph of chapter 6. The wall is finished, accomplished in the surprisingly brief time of 52 days. You would think that this would be the end of the opposition. The project was completed, and Nehemiah could take a much-needed vacation. Instead, he experiences what must have felt like betrayal. As it turned out, the nobles of Judah, those leaders who might be expected to be most supportive of Nehemiah's leadership, had allegiances that lied elsewhere. They were bound to Tobiah by marriage alliances, which would also have included economic alliances. When push came to shove, they sided with Tobiah rather than Nehemiah. But they did so in a sneaky way. They **"sent many letters to Tobiah, and Tobiah's letters came to them"** (v. 17). In other words, they were spies informing on Nehemiah to Tobiah and taking their directions from him. Moreover, they lobbied Nehemiah on behalf of Tobiah and his interests. In the third appearance of this theme of fear, we read that Tobiah used all this inside information for the purpose of increasing Nehemiah's fear. **"And Tobiah sent letters to make me afraid"** (v. 19).

## II. A Sure Defense

We've witnessed the cunning of the fox, so let's turn now to consider the "hedgehog" defense of Nehemiah. I notice three defenses he employs. The first one is seen in his response to the three governors asking him to attend their summit. He says, **"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?"** (v. 3). His defense was simply to be faithful to the work God had called him to do. It was called a "great work" even though most would not consider this work as such. They were simply building a wall, involving the lifting of heavy stones and the mixing of mortar. Most would have said that Nehemiah's former job as cupbearer to the king was a great work because it was a job of honor, wealth and prestige.

So what made this building of the wall a "great work?" It was great for two reasons. First, it was the work God had called him to undertake. Any work God calls and gifts you to do is a great work, no matter how much that work might lack in the esteem of the world. The greatness of it stems from the greatness of

the one calling you to do the work. Second, it was great because God's central plan for restoring this broken world involves establishing a home with his people, and at this point in history Jerusalem was that home. In the same way today, the Church is the place where God dwells with his people. So work done to serve the Lord through his church is a great work, no matter how small it may seem to the eyes of others.

Let's apply this by remembering the central point. Being faithful to the work God has called you to do is a defense. Specifically, it is a defense against one of Satan's primary weapons, fear. It would probably be helpful for all of us to spend less time watching the news and reading angry social media posts, and more time serving the Lord and his people. I was greatly encouraged this week when I heard of someone in our church doing just that. One of our church members had a medical condition preventing her from driving. She had four doctor's appointments in one week, and this member drove her to every single one. I spoke to him later, and he told me of the joy he experienced in doing so. That was a great work, and the joy he experienced is greater than any fear we might be tempted to fall victim to.

Nehemiah's second defense was prayer. Two prayers are recorded in our passage. The first is in verse 9, following the false accusation leveled against Nehemiah. **"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 prayed for strength for the simple reason that he felt weak. In my experience, that is what it usually feels like to serve the Lord.

Nehemiah's next prayer was for God to take up their cause against their enemies. **"Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God, according to these things that they did"** (v. 14). Such a prayer is an expression of trust in God, because it leaves things in God's hands instead of taking vengeance yourself. God knows how best to remove the obstacles to the progress of his kingdom. I heard once of the pastor of a church with a Session that was standing in the way of the work the pastor felt God wanted to do through that church. So he began to pray that God would remove any obstacles to the work he wanted to do. Within a year, some of those Session members died, others moved away and still others had a change of heart. God answered Nehemiah's prayer here as well. We read of it in verse 16. **"And 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."** This is the classic form of God's justice. What they wanted to do to Nehemiah and Israel—make them afraid—had been done to them. Prayer is a mighty weapon, both defensive and offensive, for God's people.

Nehemiah's last defense was holiness. He refused to take refuge in the temple because doing so was against God's law. One of Satan's lies about holiness is that its pursuit diminishes life rather than enhances it. It was the

original lie in the Garden of Eden. The truth is that holiness, obedience to God's law, saves lives rather than diminishing lives.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Like Nehemiah, we live in dangerous times. It has never really been any different in any age. Paul taught the Christians in his day, after being stoned and dragged out of a city, that **“through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God”** (Acts 14:22). We have resources to help us that are even greater than those possessed by Nehemiah. Let me mention three of them. First, we have a very clear mission from Jesus. He has told us what we are to be about, and that is the building of his church through making disciples of all nations. There will be more on this in my next sermon series on the mission of the church, so stay tuned for that.

Second, we have the promise of Jesus that he will build his church. He said that he will build his church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it (Matt. 16:18). The church is often persecuted, mixed with sin, weak and tarnished. But it is Jesus' church, and he will build it. So when we engage in serving Jesus by working for the progress of his church, we are doing work that will last. We need not be afraid of those attacking us, of which there will never be a shortage.

Third, we have the powerful command of Jesus not to be afraid. Over and over again, Jesus gives the command, “Fear not.” This is not your grandmother telling you, “Oh, don't be afraid! It will be fine.” This is the sovereign Lord, the King of kings, the one who spoke a word and the vast universe was created. Just as he spoke the universe into existence, he now speaks peace into existence in our hearts. When Jesus says, “Fear not,” it is not merely good counsel. It is enabling power in that he brings about what he says. So let him create this peace in your heart and be afraid no longer. Don't fear punishment for your sin any longer because Jesus has taken care of such punishment in being punished in your place. Don't fear disease and death because Jesus has conquered death. Don't fear politicians who don't share your agenda for our nation. Jesus has an agenda to bless his people that will not be stopped by any politician or even an army of politicians.

So let me invite you to be a hedgehog, pursuing a life of simple faithfulness to God, not fearing the attacks of enemies but being fruitful in your service to God and his people. You have a sure defense in the promises of our Lord and Savior, Jesus.

## **Small Group Discussion Questions Nehemiah 6**

1. It is obvious that opposition to the church in America is greater now than it was a generation ago. There are fewer church-goers, ethical standards are defined less by biblical commands than was formerly the case, and a future can be now be envisioned in which those who are faithful to biblical commands might suffer harm by civil authorities. Read again the story of the hedgehog and the fox and consider what this chapter as a whole teaches us about the proper response to these threats?

The fox is a cunning creature, able to devise a myriad of complex strategies for sneak attacks upon the hedgehog...Fast, sleek, beautiful, fleet of foot, and crafty—the fox looks like the sure winner. The hedgehog, on the other hand, is a dowdier creature, looking like a genetic mix-up between a porcupine and a small armadillo. He waddles along, going about his simple day, searching for lunch and taking care of his home. The fox waits in cunning silence at the juncture in the trail. The hedgehog, minding his own business, wanders right into the path of the fox. “Aha, I’ve got you now!” thinks the fox. He leaps out, bounding across the ground, lightning fast. The little hedgehog, sensing danger, looks up and thinks, “Here we go again. Will he ever learn?” Rolling up into a perfect little ball, the hedgehog becomes a sphere of sharp spikes, pointing outward in all directions. The fox, bounding toward his prey, sees the hedgehog defense and calls off the attack.

2. Which of the three threats that Nehemiah faced would have been the most difficult for you? The three were false accusations in an effort to get him to meet with the enemies who planned to assassinate him, the false prophecy that tempted him to respond to a threat by doing something biblically unauthorized (seeking refuge in the temple), or the betrayal by those who should have been with him (the nobles of Judah).
3. The overlying threat in this whole chapter (mentioned three times) is the attempt to bring fear to Nehemiah and the people of Israel. What harmful effects come from fear? How does it damage the Christian?
4. We see in this chapter that Nehemiah had three powerful defenses available to him in fighting his adversaries and their central threat of fear. The first was the work God had given him to do. “I am doing a great work and I cannot come down” (v. 3). Have you seen how faithfulness to the work God has given you has helped protect you?
5. Nehemiah’s second resource was prayer. He prayed that God would “strengthen my hands” (v. 9), from which we can infer that he felt weak. Ministry often feels like weakness. Have you ever felt weak in a ministry God has called you to undertake?
6. Nehemiah’s third resource was holiness. It was his obedience to God’s law that kept him from seeking refuge in the temple. How have you seen obedience to God’s commands protect you?