

Weapons of Mass Distraction

Nehemiah 6:1-19

Do you have any unfinished projects lying around collecting dust? It's so easy to get sidetracked isn't it? It takes tenacity to finish what we start because there are always so many competing distractions.

One thing that clearly emerges from our study in the Book of Nehemiah is that life is a battle from beginning to end. In Ephesians 6:12 the Apostle Paul warns, **"For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places."** Nehemiah faces the powers of darkness in our text today.

Here in Nehemiah 6, as in many other places in Scripture, we learn that the devil has predictable ways of working. That is why Paul says in 2 Corinthians 2:11, **"lest Satan should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices."** One of the devil's devices is fear. Satan is prowling around, as Peter says in 1 Peter 5:8, **"like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour."**

But he has another battle plan as well. He not only uses fear, he also utilizes flattery. In 2 Corinthians 11:14, 15 Paul says **"Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light."** and that **"his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness."** He comes with enticing promises and flattering words, assuring us that what he proposes will cost us nothing.

Whatever method the evil one employs, whether it be fear or flattery, his aim is to distract us from our mission and destroy our effectiveness. We need to be on guard because Satan is both a lion that devours and a serpent that deceives. He will try to distract us from our focus on God and His work.

Maybe you are facing some distractions right now. Maybe in your personal life: Maybe you are being distracted by all the activities in your life. Maybe in your devotional life: Maybe you are being distracted from spending time with the Lord. Maybe in church: Maybe you are trying to be distracted from serving and being part of the church. You may already be a member but Satan is trying to get you to be unuseful. Maybe in your marriage: Maybe he is trying to distract you from being a godly husband or wife.

Believe me, Satan is cunning and his distractions will often sound reasonable to us. But how should we respond and how can we prepare? Let's look at how Nehemiah responded:

The Invitation (1-4)

Since Sanballat and his sinister buddies failed in their attempts to stop the wall builders, they decide now to concentrate their attacks on Nehemiah himself by changing their tactics and resorting to subtle persuasion.

Let's take a look at verses 1-4:

1 Now it happened when Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab, and the rest of our enemies heard that I had rebuilt the wall, and that there were no breaks left in it (though at that time I had not hung the doors in the gates),

2 that Sanballat and Geshem sent to me, saying, "Come, let us meet together among the villages in the plain of Ono." But they thought to do me harm.

3 So I sent messengers to them, saying, "I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down. Why should the work cease while I leave it and go down to you?"

4 But they sent me this message four times, and I answered them in the same manner.

These enemies suddenly pretend to be Nehemiah's friends and invite him to a conference down on the plain of Ono. Ono is located on the seacoast near the Gaza strip. It was a beautiful resort area. But Nehemiah senses danger: **"But they thought to do me harm."** So Nehemiah said, "Oh, no!" to Ono.

They were probably trying to trick him into leaving Jerusalem, where he had armed support, to come to a conference where they could ambush him. Nehemiah senses this. He firmly declines, saying, **"I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down. Why should the work cease while I leave it and go down to you?"**

That is a great answer even though it sounds rather blunt. But Nehemiah sees through their scheme and refuses their invitation four different times. Let me warn you, when the devil gives an invitation, he usually does not just send it once. Think about how the devil came and tempted Jesus in the desert. He didn't just tempt Jesus once and then leave Him alone. Satan came back again and again. And Luke 4:13 tells us, **"Now when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from Him until an opportune time."** The devil keeps coming back looking for an opportunity to distract us.

When there is continuing pressure to go along with something you know is wrong, it gets tough not to give in to repeated pressure. We might decline the first invitation but find our defenses weakened as the enticements continue. But Like Jesus, Nehemiah persists in his refusal because he knows what his priorities are: "I am doing a great work. I have a great calling. God has committed a tremendous project to me, and if I leave, it will be threatened."

Sometimes these distractions come disguised as harmless options or even good things. The computer is one of my biggest distractions. I like to start my day reading and praying and then jump into my sermon preparation while I'm still fresh. Sometimes however, I turn on my computer and begin checking email before praying and reading. While that's not really a bad thing, it does serve as a distraction. Unfortunately, when I start my morning this way, I don't give God His proper place in my schedule I find it harder to focus of God's priorities all day long.

What is the solution to Satan's invitation to distraction? **Remember your priorities!** One of the most helpful things that we can do to resist temptation is to remember that God has called each of us to a great task. This is true of every believer in Christ whether you've just come to Jesus or you've known the Lord for many years. We are called to seek first the kingdom of God. We are called to holy living. We are commissioned to make disciples of all nations. We are called to serve each other in the body of Christ. It's a great calling, a great mission, a great task.

You know, it wouldn't be a bad idea to write out the priorities in your life and begin each day and end each day by simply looking at them.

I read years ago of a missionary in China whose abilities were so outstanding that one of the American companies with interests in China tried to hire him. They offered him an attractive job with a salary to match, but he turned it down. He told them that God had sent him to China as a missionary. He thought that would end the matter, but instead they came back with a better offer and an increase in salary. He turned that down too, but again they came back, doubling the financial package. Finally he said to them, "It's not your salary that's too little. It's the job that's too small!"

Friends, we've been called to a great task one that we have to make a priority or we'll be distracted from it. If we don't practice some "planned neglect" of other things, even good things, we'll be distracted from God's best. That's what Nehemiah does. He's involved in a great work, and he's not going to forsake it for anything less.

The Insinuation (5-9)

When the enemy cannot accomplish his purpose by offering peace, he switches back to his original scheme of sinister threats. He moves from political softball to political hardball. Take a look at verses 5-7:

5 Then Sanballat sent his servant to me as before, the fifth time, with an open letter in his hand.

6 In it was written: It is reported among the nations, and Geshem says, that you and the Jews plan to rebel; therefore, according to these rumors, you are rebuilding the wall, that you may be their king.

7 And you have also appointed prophets to proclaim concerning you at Jerusalem, saying, 'There is a king in Judah!' Now these matters will be reported to the king. So come, therefore, and let us consult together.

This arm-twisting tactic is designed to pressure Nehemiah to yield to their request, and thus fall into their trap. But he resists because he sees it for what it really is, an enticement based upon lies. Note that it was an "unsealed letter." In other words, it was designed for everyone to read, so that the lie would be spread around that Nehemiah was trying to make himself king.

Have you ever noticed that rumors regularly cite people of distinction as sources? That's what happened here "**and Geshem says.**" Someone has said that gossip is news you have to hurry to tell somebody else before you find out isn't true!

Their tactics were to get the people to think that Nehemiah had some hidden motive -- his own glory -- for rebuilding the wall, hoping that the workers would then become discouraged and quit. Nehemiah responded three different ways: he denied the rumor, he prayed to God for strength, and he went back to work.

Look at verse 8: "**Then I sent to him, saying, 'No such things as you say are being done, but you invent them in your own heart.'**" That's the best way to respond to a charge like this -- just a flat denial. He doesn't try to disprove the accusation but merely states, "That is a lie. There is no truth in it."

And then, invariably, as was his practice, he responds with another “popcorn prayer” in verse 9: **“For they all were trying to make us afraid, saying, ‘Their hands will be weakened in the work, and it will not be done.’ Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands.”**

Nehemiah simply prays, “Strengthen me to work all the harder.” They were on the last lap of the race and the finish line was in sight. He took care of his character and trusted God to take care of his reputation.

Don't be surprised when slandered. The servant is no greater than his master, and think about what they said about Jesus: that He was illegitimate, a glutton, a drunk, who operated in the power of the devil.

How do you deal with insinuations and rumors? Like Nehemiah did, **simply deny it, pray to God for strength, and get back to work**. We need to refuse to be intimidated by rumors that will distract us from being who it is God wants us to be as individuals and distract us from fulfilling what the Lord is calling us to as a church.

But even beyond that, we need to live our lives in such a way that we can be confident that those who know us would never believe a false rumor about us.

The Intimidation (10-19)

Once again the enemy switches his game-plan in verse 10: **“Afterward I came to the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, the son of Mehetabel, who was a secret informer; and he said, ‘Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and let us close the doors of the temple, for they are coming to kill you; indeed, at night they will come to kill you.’”**

This false prophet claims to have hidden knowledge. And what he says sounds logical: “Some people are out to get you. They are going to kill you.” Nehemiah certainly believes that! But he is not about to take the man's advice and become distracted from the work. The man suggests, “Come on up here and we will go into the temple and shut the doors. They will not dare attack you there.” That sounds good, but immediately Nehemiah detects that something is wrong. He knows that he is not permitted to go into the temple. Only priests were allowed in the holy place of the temple.

So he answers in verse 11: **“And I said, ‘Should such a man as I flee? And who is there such as I who would go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in!’”** He realizes that a prophet who was really from the Lord would never say anything contrary to God's commands. In verse 3 Nehemiah said, “I cannot come down.” Now he says, “I will not go in.”

Nehemiah recognized the deception here. This false prophet was asking him to do something contrary to God's word. You can be sure that the Lord is not behind it if you are being directed to go against His word. If a friend even gives you advice that is Contrary to the Word, don't follow it. They are either trying to do you harm or they themselves are being deceived by Satan.

You see, it's not just a matter of saying 'no' to distractions. We have to first say 'yes' to the right things, so that our priorities match up with God's priorities. We have to say 'yes' to God's word.

God gives Nehemiah some insight in verses 12-13: **“Then I perceived that God had not sent him at all, but that he pronounced this prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him.** For this reason he was hired, that I should be afraid and act that way and sin, so that they might have cause for an evil report, that they might reproach me.” It was all part of a plan to discourage and distract the people from following Nehemiah’s lead. Fueled by jealousy and ambition, these enemies slandered him and tried to trick him into yielding to their demands.

Here’s the point: Don’t let anyone or anything distract you from God’s priorities. The best response to such an approach is what Nehemiah uses here -- a deep sense of his true identity as a believer. **Understand who you are in Christ.** **“Should a man like me runaway?”** He falls back upon his clear understanding of who he is and what his priorities are. He is a believer in the Living God and as so he need not resort running for his life.

Nehemiah meets this attack of the enemy by going to prayer once again in verse 14:

“My God, remember Tobiah and Sanballat, according to these their works, and the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who would have made me afraid.”

This brings us to the end of this first phase of Nehemiah’s work in verses 15-16: **“So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of Elul, in fifty-two days. And it happened, when all our enemies heard of it, and all the nations around us saw these things, that they were very disheartened in their own eyes; for they perceived that this work was done by our God.”** Even their enemies had to admit that God was at work! This entire project was finished in just 52 days!

What a beautiful picture of the power of God at work! What a great witness to the lost world! Even their enemies must agree that God is at work among them. But the enemies are still not through. In these closing verses we see how they continue their tactics of opposing and distracting: **“Also in those days the nobles of Judah sent many letters to Tobiah, and the letters of Tobiah came to them. For many in Judah were pledged to him, because he was the son-in-law of Shechaniah the son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah.”** (17-18)

That is simply saying that Tobiah had intermarried with the Israelites. Taking advantage of that relationship, he was seeking to undermine Nehemiah’s influence by nothing more than mere gossip. As Nehemiah says in verse 19: **“Also they reported his good deeds before me, and reported my words to him. Tobiah sent letters to frighten me.”**

Here’s one of the overriding truths from this book: the devil never quits. He is never going to give up while we are still alive. God has wonderful blessings and much encouragement and joy for us along the way, but we must never cease battling against the world, the flesh and the devil until we get to heaven. The enemy of God will never quit. If he cannot distract you with fear and flattery, he will use gossip and false accusations.

Action Steps

As we close this morning, let's ask God to apply this passage to our lives. I see at least two action steps:

1. Practice saying, "yes" to God's priorities. The best way to not be distracted is by being attracted to those things that are on the heart of God. Once we're aware of what those are, and are attracted to them, we need to commit ourselves to a life of full devotion and complete commitment.

What is it that's important to you? Are you locked into God's kingdom purposes or are you focused on a bunch of other things?

2. Practice saying, "no" to the devil's distractions. I don't know what distractions you're faced with but it might be television. I read this week that the average American spends three hours and 46 minutes watching TV every day. That equals 52 days of nonstop TV watching per year. By the age of 65, the average American will have spent nearly nine years glued to the tube.

Let's take some time right now and ask the Holy Spirit to help you identify those things that are distracting you from God's priorities. Is it a friend? An activity? Your money? Your possessions? Your thought life? Your career? When the Spirit makes it clear, decide how you can begin to say "no" to those things that are derailing you from what's most important. Maybe you can practice saying, "no" like Nehemiah did "I will not come down" and "I will not go in."

ILLUS: There is a story involving Yogi Berra, the well-known catcher for the New York Yankees, and Hank Aaron, who at that time was the chief power hitter for the Milwaukee Braves. The teams were playing in the 1958 World Series, and as usual Yogi was keeping up his ceaseless chatter, attempting to distract the Milwaukee batters. As Aaron came to the plate, Yogi tried to distract him by saying, "Henry, you're holding the bat wrong. You're supposed to hold it so you can read the trademark." "hit with the label up on the bat." Aaron didn't say anything, but when the next pitch came he hit it into the left-field bleachers. After rounding the bases and tagging up at home plate, Aaron looked at Yogi Berra and said, "I didn't come up here to read."

Keep working, Christian; keep trusting God. Keep seeking first His glory. Don't be distracted, but focus on the cross!

Conclusion

Friends, the enemy will act to distract you. But while he blasts away, God is building His kingdom. Satan is subtle but God is sufficient. Remember, when God's priorities become our priorities, God's kingdom work will advance. When the wall was completed, verse 16 says, "...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." May that be said of us!

Luke 13:31 On that very day some Pharisees came, saying to Him, "Get out and depart from here, for Herod wants to kill You."

32 And He said to them, "Go, tell that fox, 'Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I shall be perfected.'

33 "Nevertheless I must journey today, tomorrow, and the day following; for it cannot be that a prophet should perish outside of Jerusalem.