

FINISHING WHAT YOU HAVE STARTED

Nehemiah 6

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Nehemiah 6:1–7:3 (NIV)

“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’m 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. 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 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 confer together.’ I sent 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.’ But I prayed, ‘Now strengthen my hands.’ 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.’ But I said, ‘Should a man like me run away? Or should one like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go!’ I

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realized that God had not sent him, but 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. Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God, because of what they have done; remember also the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who have been trying to intimidate me. So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days. 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. Also, in those days the nobles of Judah were sending many letters to Tobiah, and replies from Tobiah kept coming to them. Many in Judah were under oath to him, since he was son-in-law to Shecaniah son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam son of Berekiah. Moreover, they kept reporting to me his good deeds and then telling him what I said. And Tobiah sent letters to intimidate me. After the wall had been rebuilt and I had set the doors in place, the gatekeepers and the singers and the Levites were appointed. 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 men do. 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.’”

Today we continue the series, “Walls Under Reconstruction.” The title of today’s message is “Finishing What You Have Started.” Is there something in your own life, something you began with great gusto and zeal and you went along for maybe a week or two or a month or two or maybe a year or two then all of a sudden there’s a dirt hole in your life and chuck holes all over

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the place? “He that boasts, take heed lest he fall!” If we would examine our lives carefully enough I think there are areas that we start out to do but somehow just come to an end and never get picked back up. Things that we started out to do perhaps with our family and got maybe a good way and it was nice and great then bang all of a sudden it ended. We hadn’t planned far enough.

In the New Testament there’s an example of such a person, John Mark, who went with the apostle Paul on his first missionary journey. No sooner did he get to where it got dangerous than he backed out. He was strong on enthusiasm but low on endurance, which is kind of characteristic of having that sort of road in our life, beginning with great enthusiasm but not having the staying power with it.

Suffering or trial is meant to produce perseverance or endurance. But sometimes suffering or trial does not produce perseverance. It produces failure if we let it.

I mention John Mark to say that as we come to Nehemiah 6 we ought to recognize a type of pattern being given. We are given a type of pattern of a person who had perseverance, an enduring power, whose enthusiasm at the end was as strong as it was at the beginning. But we ought to recognize also there are other patterns in Scripture where there have been people who have had a road come to an end and didn’t follow through and yet as they returned to God, God picked them back up and the road got underway again.

So the message that I have this morning “Finishing What You Have Started” is not meant to be a club for those of us who have perhaps had a road come to an end but is meant to be an incentive and a help, recognizing that on the one hand there are people in our midst who have really attained in a spiritual sense and maybe could look at their lives and not see any unfinished roads like Nehemiah, but others perhaps could see some.

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Some basic principles come out of our Scripture today. I think there are some basic principles that I have seen in Nehemiah 6 and especially as Nehemiah 6 relates to the rest of the book.

I. One principle that emerges is simply this—and we all know it—no one ever finishes who has not been tested every step of the way.

In Nehemiah the work is tested six specific times. I don't really feel that the Holy Spirit has that in the book by accident. I find in the work of God in my own life and in the life of this church that there is a continual testing and it happens at ongoing intervals. If we look back for a moment to the Book of Nehemiah we see that the work first began to be tested at the conception of the work—all the way back in 2:10. Nehemiah was still back in Susa the capital of Persia. When God had spoken to his heart to do something about the walls of Jerusalem immediately we are aware in 2:10 that Sanballat and Tobiah have heard of it and they're much disturbed that someone is coming to promote the welfare of the Israelites. If we can get picked off of our road of accomplishment at the very conception then that finishes it. Look, for example, at the history of Israel trying to move into the Promised Land. Where were they initially defeated? They were initially defeated in the minds of ten spies who looked at the size of the task and they were frightened by the size of the task and the conception they had of the work and they backed off. This is the kind of thing the enemy tries to do in our life, when we first come to the Lord, when we're beginning. When we just begin to open our life and the Holy Spirit convicts us, what does the tempter immediately say? "No, you can't do that. You can't live it. You think you can change? No. You can't. This is just another phase you're going through." He attempts to defeat you at the very conception of the work of the Lord within you.

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When you begin to respond to God's will in your life, consider how Sanballat and Tobiah disturbed Nehemiah. I think Sanballat and Tobiah typify how the enemy Satan, when you begin to really serve the Lord, wakes up and gets disturbed.

The enemy is bound. Jesus has bound him in the cross and the resurrection. He may growl all he wants. He'll try to frighten and intimidate us. But if we look, we realize God has him on a chain. When God calls us to do something and given us the new life to live and given us a work to do, we must move forward, not with intimidation, but with faith.

Nehemiah was tempted at the beginning of the work, but he went ahead anyway. The next thing the enemy tries to do with Nehemiah is when Nehemiah announces to his fellow compatriots, his fellow citizens, that they're going to start rebuilding the wall; they reply, "Let us start rebuilding" (2:18). They haven't turned shovel yet. He's just announced what's going to be done.

When Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed, saying, "What is this you are doing? Are you are rebelling against the king?" (verse 19).

The announcement of a work: When we share with someone else the dream and revelation God has given to us in our life, when we become a Christian, we announce it to someone. When we announce something often the enemy comes and what he'll do is immediately make us wish we hadn't said anything at all. We feel like a blithering idiot. The enemy wants you to focus continually on your weakness and on your motive.

Notice what happens in 2:19 when they say, "Are you rebelling against the king?" Sanballat wants to challenge Nehemiah's motive. Nehemiah actually has a pure motive. But Sanballat and Tobiah tell him, "You're in this for yourself."

Jesus tells us in the Parable of the Sower that when the seed is sown, Satan is there and he's ready to scoop the seed that is on the soil. He wants to swoop it at the very beginning of the

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work. The Scriptures say we're like the soil ourselves. We have to be receptive. So what I do in the receptivity of my heart, I pull that seed down into the soil and I take it into myself, when I internalize what the Lord has done for me so that it doesn't remain something external out here that I'm not working on. When I internalize it, Satan goes and looks for the seed and he can't find it because it's in the ground. He can only find it if we let what God has given to us simply be on the external and we never act on it, we never do anything about it.

The next time Nehemiah is tested is at the start of the work in chapter 4. In Nehemiah 3 we simply have the straight account of the rebuilding of the wall. In Nehemiah 4, 5, and 6 it comes back and tells us how it was done. But Nehemiah 4:2 tells us right when they started the work, there again was opposition. What was it this time? It was opposition that the enemy used to try to focus their eyes on the rubble; in so many words, "Look at all the rubble around. You can never get a wall up. There's too much mess." That is often the case when God gives us a vision for our own lives, or a vision for our church fellowship. We look around and say, "There is so much rubble; can anything be built?" So we begin to see things as they are, instead of what, under God, they shall be.

Looking at the rubble of humanity that come with needs, what can be done? I believe the future growth of our fellowship is going to be greatly conditioned on prayer and fasting that really believes that people who come with problems of any kind can find an answer in Jesus Christ in a fellowship of people who really care and pray and teach. This church was tested at the beginning. In Nehemiah 4:6 the work of God was tested midway through the rebuilding of the wall. There it was tested by both fear and disunity. They tried to make them afraid of all the external opposition on the outside as well as to get them fighting among themselves.

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And today in chapter 6, just as the wall is nearing completion, all that remains is for the doors to be hung in the gates. There is again another severe test. It's God's way of reminding us in Scripture that even when we're at the brink of success we cannot be careless. As Paul says to the Corinthians, "When you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall" (1 Corinthians 10:12).

II. It is often the case that just when we feel like we have arrived, in that feeling we may become suddenly at ease in our spirit and set ourselves up for a fall because we have not continued to be vigilant in our spiritual life.

When did David gaze at Bathsheba? When he was at the pinnacle of success. When did Jonah fall into self-pity? When he had just preached the most powerful sermon and had met the greatest response of his whole career. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9:27, "I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize." Paul is aware of this tremendous, subtle danger that can come in a spiritual life, that we might in the end wind up, in terms of our workmanship, unapproved because we have let down our guard. Near completion of the work we cannot just relax and settle down and think, "We've come this far. We've served God for these many years. We don't need to be careful, don't need to maintain a vigilant prayer life. Don't need to be active in the Lord's work." We cannot just drop out near the completion of the task. That's a way to get picked off.

In Nehemiah's case as he nears the completion, verses 1-4 tell us there are schemes that come against him. Sanballat and Geshem are saying, "Let's meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono." Nehemiah meets this with spiritual discernment. He can tell there's nothing good in this. I think we need to be aware of what is harmful in our life. They were saying to Nehemiah, "You need to get away." They probably wanted to get him to the village and perhaps

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assassinate him or mentally break him down, but he's going to have nothing to do with it. It seems they were trying to get him away from the calling of God and the work of God on his life. It may be true that from time to time in our own walk with the Lord we need to like go up to a retreat and have a time of rest. But continually I find that one of the temptations in our area is to meet and back off the work God's called us to do and not assume responsibility, but just to pursue our own interest and pleasure. And every weekend feed ourselves with "What's the next way we can gratify ourselves?" It becomes the kind of thing that picks us off from doing the work of God because we're so bent on our own selfish interest and pursuits and relaxation that it can become a way of compromising the work of God within us.

I think we get picked off too by burning both ends of the candle in terms of our work responsibilities and neglecting the task God gives us to do within family life. All these can be schemes from subtly picking us off from doing God's work.

III. When schemes don't work, then Nehemiah is faced at the near completion of his work with untruths.

It's a fantastic passage in verse 5. The fifth time Sanballat sends this message and with it an unsealed letter. An unsealed letter is a letter that everybody can read. That's the purpose of sending it, so along the way people are pulling it out and by the time the letter gets to Nehemiah, everybody's read it. It's a sheer rumor mill is all it is, and if a rumor mill can't destroy the work of God, I don't know what can.

This is a fascinating example by the way of what happens in a rumor. A rumor generally begins with a statement like, "It is reported." Notice no source is identified. Just "It is reported" (verse 6). Who reports it? In a rumor you never know. And "Geshem says it is true." Nehemiah has enough knowledge of Geshem to know that if he's confirmed the rumor it's got to be a rumor.

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The rumor also is one that is inaccurate and exaggerated. It's exaggerated in the sense that they are maligning the motives of the people for rebuilding the wall. It's completely inaccurate in saying Nehemiah is trying to be king. A rumor also is inevitably designed to hurt. People are often ready to believe the worst.

Nehemiah responds in two ways. He slapped the rumor down with a quick word of truth and then he prayed for continued strength. He says "But I prayed, 'Now strengthen my hands'" (verse 9).

There are times we don't have time to pray some of the longer prayers as Nehemiah had prayed in the book; but now it's simply, "Lord, strengthen my hands."

Notice, Satan had tried to attack him in the head by intimidating him, but he says "Strengthen my hands," which is a way of saying if Satan can get fear in our head and defeat us in our faith, we need our hands, and our resolve, to be actually strengthened to do the work.

In the body of Christ I've found sometimes when rumors circulate and the person begins to be aware that the rumor is against them they can become so discouraged they actually leave the calling God has called them to do. Nehemiah doesn't let that happen. He simply turns around and says "God, strengthen my hands."

IV. As he is still nearing completion of the task, betrayal sets in, verses 10–14, by a guy by the name of Shemaiah.

Nehemiah hadn't gone out on the plain, but there's a prophet who was shut up for some reason, maybe to pray. He said, "I need to see Nehemiah because I'm in touch with God." Nehemiah comes and he wants Nehemiah to walk into this trap of going into areas of the temple that were off limits to him as a lay person in the Old Testament way of doing things. Nehemiah says nothing doing. He learned of the intrigue that was directed against him. David says, "Even my close friend whom I trusted, he who shared my bread has lifted up his heel against me" (Psalm

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41:9). What a tremendous pick-off it can be if we can be betrayed by someone who is close to us. I think in our day it maybe can be translated, “Even my close friend whom I trusted, who shared my bed with me, has lifted up his heel against me.”

When the enemy attacks on our personal security we need the resources of the Lord. From the Father we gain a sense of belonging. From the Son we gain a sense of worth. And from the Spirit we gain a sense of competence that He will cause us to be equal to the task which God has given to us to do.

In 6:15–7:3, at the completion of the work, there is still vigilance. Because Tobiah had himself married a Jewess, and his son had married the daughter of one of the workers on the wall, letters keep coming in. Satan works from within. When the walls were up Nehemiah’s trust was still in the Lord and he posted a guard to make sure people didn’t come inside the city except at approved hours with approved guards.

The twofold success of Nehemiah is simply work and God. He says God helps us; it’s not we help God.

There is recognition as we follow the Lord and work with Him that we are continually tested. No one ever finishes who has not been tested every step of the way. I’d say also that no one ever finishes who hasn’t found the same discouragement again and again. It’s all through these six chapters of Nehemiah. We’ve come across the names of Sanballat and Tobiah. They’re there from the conception of the work to the completion of the work. They’re always there.

I think we need to personify our Sanballat and Tobiah. To recognize that there are things that keep coming up again over and over in our life that try to use different strategies but basically the same people or the same sources are trying to attack us and saying, “Quit doing the work of God.”

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We are not going to ever complete the work of God until we've practiced the disciplines of Nehemiah. Keep your eye on the goal, have complete dependence on God to accomplish the goal, confidence in His word that what He's given to us as a word of faith shall be done, a readiness to work hard and stay vigilant, and flexibility on methods. Nehemiah was this way.

When he began and the enemy came upon him, he simply shortened the work load and had some people watch and some work. Perseverance. And single-mindedness that no matter what we're going through. As Paul says, "I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4:7).

This is a kind of single-minded devotion to the Lord that says, "No matter what, if you help us we're going to serve You and do Your will and Your work. We're going to finish what You've given for us to do."

Closing Prayer

Lord, You're going to complete what You've started in our life and we depend upon You for that. Amen.