

A Great Work Nehemiah 6, 7

This week, a 28-year-old South Korean man died of exhaustion in an Internet cafe after playing computer games non-stop for 49 hours. He collapsed after having eaten minimally and not sleeping, refusing to leave his keyboard while he played the battle simulation game *Starcraft*. It is presumed he had a heart attack. He was fired from his job last month because he kept missing work to play computer games. I appreciate a sense of focus, but what an idiotic obsession.

Whenever we find ourselves pouring ourselves into anything, may it be something that God would consider, “a great work” – for instance, some work into which He Himself has invited us. I cannot bring myself to refer to Nehemiah as “a man obsessed.” That has a quirky connotation. But, he did know that he was engaged in a great work, a work that God had laid upon his heart and a work in which he knew God had been present. The clarity that came from knowing that he was doing work God had called and empowered him to do served him mightily. It gave him boldness and steely determination against all sorts of subtle and not so subtle enemy onslaughts.

As chapter 6 opens, Sanballat and company are once again found trying to undermine Nehemiah’s plans:

I. A Conspiracy Resisted (1-14)

A. An Assault of Intrigue verses 1-4

The plain of Ono was twenty-five to thirty miles northwest of Jerusalem. Objective political analysts might have called it a neutral site for a peace summit. Perhaps, this was what Sanballat and Geshem the Arab were attempting to convey to Nehemiah. “Hey, we know we have given you a hard time in the past, but you’ve hung in there and that wall is just about finished. Since we’re going to be neighbors, we might as well get together and work out some terms for living together peaceably. Come on up and meet us at one of the villages on the plain of Ono.”

Nehemiah’s answer to the Ono Summit was “Oh, no you don’t!” The truth was that his enemies who had resisted the rebuilding of the Jerusalem’s walls from day one were now desperate. All that remained of the project was the hanging of the gates. That would finalize the restoration of Jerusalem to its former status as a fortress city. Nehemiah records: “But they were scheming to harm me ...” (verse 3). Most commentators suggest that this is a euphemism. They probably didn’t plan to gang up on him and give him a “red belly.” They certainly planned to murder him.

Nehemiah sent a forceful reply back to Sanballat and Geshem: “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?” (verse 3). Nehemiah’s answer reflected a sense of gravity about what he perceived to be the call of God upon his life. Jerusalem had lay in a state of disrepair and disgrace for over a century and a half, ever since Babylon had destroyed the city. Because Jerusalem’s walls had been neglected, she was vulnerable to her enemies, and pagans wielded influence even inside the community itself.

God had placed the burden for Jerusalem in Nehemiah’s heart. God’s providence had won the support of a Persian king, the title of governor and the royal authorization to receive whatever materials he needed from royal suppliers. God had prepared and stirred the city’s population to respond to this great work, and now, it was almost complete. Nehemiah would not be distracted.

B. An Assault of Innuendo verses 5-9

After four attempts to con Nehemiah into meeting, Sanballat sent an aide with “an unsealed letter” in his hand. Official letters were rolled, tied with a string and sealed with clay bearing an official mark that testified to the letter’s authenticity. An unsealed letter was a joke. No one knew where it came from. The carriers peeked at it. Whispers would inevitably circulate. This letter conveyed a rumor that the Jews were plotting a revolt and that Nehemiah wanted to be king.

The implication was: “Nehemiah, surely you don’t want a rumor like this working its way back to King Artaxerxes in Susa?” But, Nehemiah did not flinch. The rumor was utter nonsense. He did not try to contain it. He did not send envoys to Susa to try to do damage control with the king. He did not defend himself to his accusers. He simply said, “Buzz off, Sanballat!” “Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head” (verse 8).

Of course, Nehemiah also recognized that a reaction out of him may not have been Sanballat’s intention at all. He wanted to frighten and demoralize the community at large:

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.” – verse 9

C. An Assault of Intimidation verses 10-14

Shemaiah, a man recognized as both a prophet and a priest was “shut up in his own home” (verse 10). It was part of a ploy to convince Nehemiah that he was his ally. “Some guys are going to try to kill you at night. We, you and I, should take refuge in the temple. We’ll bar the doors that separate the house of God from the outer court. Maybe we’ll be safe in there!”

Nehemiah smelled a rat. “Should a man like me run away?” (verse 11). It wasn’t gubernatorial to run and whimper like a scalded dog. Then he added, “Or should one like me go into the temple to save his life?” (verse 11). He was not a priest. He had no standing to enter the temple. Uzziah, a relatively good king, in his pride, once entered the temple to burn incense. The LORD struck him with leprosy that plagued him for the rest of his life. When any man suggests that others break God’s law, his prophetic credentials should become immediately suspect.

It may have been right then or it may have been some time later that Nehemiah realized Shemaiah had been hired by Sanballat and Tobiah to entice him to enter the temple. This would have damaged Nehemiah’s integrity and lowered his standing in the eyes of the people. First of all, he was not a priest, and secondly, it would have placed the most holy edifice in the life of the Jewish people in harm’s way just for a man to save his own skin. Nehemiah would have none of it. He prayed simply that God would remember and deal with Sanballat, Tobiah and their hired prophets and prophetesses who were trying to frighten him out of obeying the will of God.

When a man knows God’s will and is wholly devoted to it, he has what it takes to stand in the face of any storm. But, if a man is prone to getting sidetracked by personal ambitions, secular wisdom or worldly success models, he sets himself up to be at least distracted, if not devastated, by every attack, doubt, guilt trip, rumor, intimidation ploy and temptation that crosses his path.

What a powerful example a man like Nehemiah is for modern folks like us. Deception was looming, rumors were flying, temptation was attacking and Nehemiah was saying: “I know who I am. I know why I’m here. I know what God’s called me to do. And, for the sake of the flock of God and for the sake of my own integrity in the presence of God, I’m not going to be distracted.”

II. A City Repaired (15–19)

A. The Enemy without Was Demoralized verses 15, 16

¹⁵So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days. ¹⁶When 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.

Walls that had been neglected for over one and one-half centuries were completed in fifty-two days. Someone could say, “What’s the big deal? The materials were on hand. The workers were numerous. Everyone was enthusiastic.” But there was a reason that the materials were available and that everyone was available and zealous. And, even though a modern cynic might dismiss it, Nehemiah’s enemies were disheartened because they could not help but to see it. In spite of their best efforts to thwart the Jews at every turn, God had moved the hearts of his people. Nehemiah wrote: “... they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God” (verse 16.)

B. The Enemy within Remained Determined verses 17–19

¹⁷Also, in those days the nobles of Judah were sending many letters to Tobiah, and replies from Tobiah kept coming to them.

During the Spanish Civil War, General Emilio Mola coined the term, “Fifth Column,” which refers to any clandestine group of subversive agents who attempt, from the inside, to undermine a nation’s solidarity. Tobiah, Sanballat’s associate, had connections in Jerusalem that functioned as such a Fifth Column. His son was married to a woman from one family, and he himself was the son-in-law of another nobleman. These insiders consistently “talked up” Tobiah as a doer of good deeds, trying to convince Nehemiah that he had wide-spread credibility and popularity. At the same time, Tobiah kept trying to intimidate the governor on the basis of alleged influence that was simply a matter of the propaganda of a few, and that really had no teeth whatsoever.

Tobiah’s connections had no influence on Nehemiah, but they would come back to plague the city later. After twelve years, Nehemiah would be recalled to Susa. In a two year period, the fox would get into the henhouse as Tobiah established a presence in Jerusalem. Nehemiah would return and deal decisively with Tobiah just as he has to date. But, it still proves that God’s people must always be vigilant about the purity of the community. To the elders of Ephesus, Paul said:

... ²⁸Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. ²⁹I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. ³⁰Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. ³¹So be on your guard!
- Acts 20:28–31

III. A Community Renewed (7:1-73)

A. Jerusalem Was Renewed in Vigilance verses 1-62

When the project was completed, Nehemiah set in place security measures. Hanani, his brother, was made City Manager. Hananiah was named Secretary of Homeland Security. Levites who served as gatekeepers typically functioned as security guards for the temple, but under Code Red conditions, their realm of responsibility was expanded. They functioned as guards and watchmen along the whole city wall. Nehemiah also set up a "Neighborhood Watch program." Ordinarily, the gates of an ancient city were opened at dawn, but special times called for special measures. Nehemiah ordered that the gates be barred until the heat of the day. This would ward off any early morning raids and it would also render any overt attacks less palatable to the enemy.

But there was another deficiency that, when corrected, would render the city safer. It needed people. "Now the city was large and spacious, but there were few people in it, and the houses had not yet been rebuilt" (Nehemiah 7:4). So, from the surrounding fields and villages, Nehemiah called on many to inhabit the city. The bulk of chapter 7 reads like the Jerusalem phonebook, but when this assembly, which numbered nearly 50,000 people in addition to 8,136 assorted critters, moved into the city, it was once again an impressive city by ancient standards.

B. Jerusalem Was Renewed in Purity verses 63-65

Because of the temple, many who lived in Jerusalem were priests. Priests had to be descendants of Aaron, the first high priest and Moses' brother. This line had been set apart by God for the uniquely holy work of representing the people before God. Because it was a holy work, proof of genealogy was essential. As the city was being populated, three groups came forward and presented themselves as priests. They were descendants of "Hobaijah, Hakkoz and Barzillai."

⁶⁴These searched for their family records, but they could not find them and so were excluded from the priesthood as unclean. ⁶⁵The governor, therefore, ordered them not to eat any of the most sacred food until there should be a priest ministering with the Urim and Thummim.

Because these men could not verify their bloodline, they were disqualified as priests. If a priest came forward to minister with "the Urim and Thummim," they might be restored. In the days of Moses, the Urim and Thummim were carried in the high priest's ephod. They were used for seeking the immediate will of God in special circumstances. They may have been stones with engravings. They may have glowed for all we know, The Bible does not provide any details. In any event, this may have been only a rhetorical condition for restoring these men as priests, for we have no record of a priest actually using the Urim and Thummim since the days of King Saul.

The point is that only those who God had clearly set apart could approach God. Holiness must be at the heart of community worship. In the church age, we don't have priests that represent us before God. We are a nation of priests. Each of us can approach God through our Great High Priest, Jesus Christ. But that does not diminish the need for holiness in worship.

Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. – Hebrews 12:14

C. Jerusalem Was Renewed in the Spirit of Sacrifice verses 70-72

⁷⁰Some of the heads of the families contributed to the work ...

The work referenced is the work of the temple, the work of conducting the worship life of the nation. The sacrifices began with Nehemiah. From his own resources, he provided about 19 pounds of gold, 50 bowls or basins to be used by the priests and 530 garments. Then, the heads of the more affluent families gave the equivalent of about 380 pounds of gold and nearly two and one-half tons of silver. But sacrifice was not limited to the rich. The rest of the people came up with another 380 pounds of gold, over two tons of silver and 67 more priestly garments.

The rich people had the greater resources. They needed to be generous just to get the temple up and running as it should. But, even though the poor did not individually have the resources that the rich had, they could not exempt themselves from sacrificing. They had to see that it is a privilege to be a part of getting the temple program on track. Nobody was back in Jerusalem just to have a place to live. Even the fierce patriotic zeal about restoring a nation was an inadequate cause for sacrifice. This was God's nation. Jerusalem was the home of God's temple. The chief program, the real reason they were back in the land, was to be the light of the world to the Gentiles. They had been restored as a people to restore the worship of the true living God.

An Observation about Gift-Oriented Ministry

I continue to see parallels between the *Eight Characteristics of a Healthy Church* and the restoration of Jerusalem in Nehemiah's day. It seems that the consistent features of truly healthy faith communities span the centuries. Today, I observe "Gift-Oriented Ministry," the concept that God actually has a hand in placing people precisely where they need to be in healthy communities.

If I read chapter 7 in its entirety, I would have gently shake each of you to wake you and send you to lunch. Only the priests could minister in the temple, but there were Levites galore and among them, some were gatekeepers, some were singers and some were temple support staff. Everyone sacrificed, but it was God Who had made the rich, rich and able to make an impact.

We function best when we know what God would have for us to do. It gives us a sense of calling to think that God has gifted us in a certain way. We function not in our own strength, but in His strength when we believe that God Himself has enabled us to serve Him in certain ways.

But I also think of Nehemiah himself and how he stood before his enemies and said, "I can't be playing games with you Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem. I can't be walking away from the work that I know God has called me to do by participating in silly summits, stamping out rumors or hiding in fear." Like Nehemiah, we need to pour ourselves into those areas where God has made it clear that He wants us. The Apostles of Acts 4 found others to carry the load of ministry so that their work of providing the Word of God to the people and prayer could be unencumbered.

One other thing about gifts: Jerusalem had laid waste for many years while her citizens endured captivity in a foreign land. Even after some returned to put things back together, the city lay in neglect as the people attended to their individual issues. But, when a repentant people were restored to the zeal of the Lord, God was there. Whether or not this Jerusalem looked much like Jerusalem at the height of her former glory, God was there, and He provided all the parts, all the players, all the gifted people Jerusalem needed to move forth glorifying her God. He still does.