

Nehemiah 6:1-19 (ESV)

¹ Now when Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies heard that I had built the wall and that there was no breach left in it (although up to that time I had not set up the doors in the gates), ² Sanballat and Geshem sent to me, saying, "Come and let us meet together at Hakkephirim in the plain of Ono." But they intended to do me harm.

³ And I sent messengers to them, saying, "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?" ⁴ And they sent to me four times in this way, and I answered them in the same manner.

⁵ In the same way Sanballat for the fifth time sent his servant to me with an open letter in his hand. ⁶ In it was written, "It is reported among the nations, and Geshem also says it, that you and the Jews intend to rebel; that is why you are building the wall. And according to these reports you wish to become their king. ⁷ And you have also set up prophets to proclaim concerning you in Jerusalem, 'There is a king in Judah.' And now the king will hear of these reports. So now come and let us take counsel together."

⁸ Then I sent to him, saying, "No such things as you say have been done, for you are inventing them out of your own mind."

⁹ 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. ¹⁰ Now when I went into the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, son of Mehetabel, who was confined to his home, he said, "Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple. Let us close the doors of the temple, for they are coming to kill you. They are coming to kill you by night." ¹¹ But I said, "Should such a man as I run away? And what man such as I could go into the temple and live? I will not go in." ¹² And I understood and saw that God had not sent him, but he had pronounced the prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. ¹³ For this purpose he was hired, that I should be afraid and act in this way and sin, and so they could give me a bad name in order to taunt me.

¹⁴ Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God, according to these things that they did, and also the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who wanted to make me afraid.

¹⁵ So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days.

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. ¹⁷ Moreover, in those days the nobles of Judah sent many letters to Tobiah, and Tobiah's letters came to them. ¹⁸ For many in Judah were bound by oath to him, because he was the son-in-law of Shecaniah the son of Arah: and his son Jehohanan had taken the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah as his wife. ¹⁹ Also they spoke of his good deeds in my presence and reported my words to him. And Tobiah sent letters to make me afraid.

Nehemiah 7:1-4 (ESV)

¹ Now when the wall had been built and I had set up the doors, and the gatekeepers, the singers, and the Levites had been appointed, ² I gave my brother Hanani and Hananiah the governor of the castle charge over Jerusalem, for he was a more faithful and God-fearing man than many. ³ And I said to them, "Let not the gates of Jerusalem be opened until the sun is hot. And while they are still standing guard, let them shut and bar the doors. Appoint guards from among the inhabitants of Jerusalem, some at their guard posts and some in front of their own homes." ⁴ The city was wide and large, but the people within it were few, and no houses had been rebuilt. ⁵ So my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles, the officials and the common people for registration by families.

Nehemiah is a book with insights for us into restoration, renewal, leadership, and God's faithfulness.

Read Nehemiah 6:1-19
(Questions for later personal reflection)

16. Why is the work on the wall at a crucial stage? How does the opposition react to apparent success?

17. In Chapter 6, a number of traps were laid for Nehemiah. How did they appear on the outside, and what were the snares laid within?

18. What could have happened to Nehemiah's effectiveness as a leader, if he hadn't responded as he did? How did God answer his prayer in vs. 9, 10?

19. At the beginning of chapter 7 is an indication that walls are not enough. Why? What does Jerusalem still need?

The opposition to the work in Jerusalem increases as it progresses both in the number of foes, and in the intensity of their attacks. Chapters four through six are illustrative of the ways Satan attacks the Church. Fear, intimidation and threats in Four. Internal problems and damaged relationships in Five. Attacks upon the leadership in Chapter 6.

Sanballat and his cronies are minor league compared to the one whose tactics are described in 1 Peter 5:8, 9; Eph 4:26ff, and Eph 6:11. Psalms 140 and 141 warn about their snares and traps. Nehemiah had served as cupbearer to the king, and probably had observed all the byzantine power politics of Persia. The same kind of character assassinations and other tricks that dominate our own modern world and media. Things are seldom what they seem. Here in Chapter Six tactics change in a intricate series of intimidating attacks upon Nehemiah and his leadership. At the end of Chapter 5, it has been made clear that Nehemiah has been now been appointed Governor – this may have been a promotion beyond his initial mission to rebuild the walls. He has a government to deal with as well as an official role as a leader over the people.

The first series of attacks (6:2-4) came as “peace conference” overtures – requesting a meeting in an obscure border town. A perfect place for an ambush, but Nehemiah's refusal to meet could make it look like he is the one being unreasonable and unfriendly. Motives aren't clear, Nehemiah waits them out.

Then an “open letter” is sent to him (6:4-9) – spreading false but believable rumors about Nehemiah's intentions publicly along the way - a version of modern day “media assassination.” While implying that they have Nehemiah's welfare at heart, in reality, they are threatening his relationship with Artaxerxes, questioning his motives publicly, and trying to provoke him to over-react out of fear.

Then he is summoned by a prophet, Shemaiah. (6:10-14) who “knows” of an assassination plot. His suggestion that Nehemiah, a layman, enter the holy place where God has said only priests may go, proved he was a false prophet hired by the enemy. Apparently there were other false prophets in town also undermining Nehemiah. (6:14)

We learn something more in this chapter about the opponents (6:17-19). Tobiah (whose Hebrew name means “God is Good”) had marriage connections within Judah, including a son in law, Meshullam, who was a leader in Judah, and strong supporter of the wall (see Ezra 8:16, 10:15, Neh 3:6, 10, 8:4, and possibly 12:25 cf 13:4). Tobiah maintained correspondence with a number of nobles in Judah, and probably used this to gather intelligence about the work and to intimidate. Sanballat also had connections by marriage as one of the sons of Eliashib the high priest was Sanballat's son-in-law (Neh 13:28). This chapter reveals there are enemies and traitors within (cf 2 Cor 11:13-14) and even friends may have mixed motives. One wrong move and Nehemiah could easily lose the support of his people.

Gene Getz suggests that this account illustrates six principles for dealing with false accusations: 1. When criticized we must not counter attack by questioning the other person's motives. 2. We must be patient and wait for motives to be revealed. 3. Criticized by unbelievers, we should follow Peter's advice: 1 Peter 2:12, 15; 3:14-16). 4. When criticized unjustly, we must be bold and honest in our responses to rumors, but never take revenge. 5. When falsely accused we must not allow fear to cloud our perceptions and cause us to act impulsively and do something foolish. 6. when we follow God's principles for handling false accusations, He will ultimately defend us. (Getz, Nehemiah: Becoming a Disciplined Leader)