

We're moving right along in our series on the Old Testament book of Nehemiah. It's called *Re-Visioning: Pursuing God's Purpose with Fresh Eyes*. The series is designed to help us enter into a season of discerning God's longer-term vision for Cornerstone.

Whatever the next major strategic moves God calls us to make as a church (some possibilities we've been exploring and praying about as a congregation include planting a second campus in another community, launching a third worship service, and developing a leadership institute— whether it's any combination of those things or perhaps something else, such as expanding this facility), we know that the Holy Spirit is once again inviting us to expect great things from God, and attempt great things for God as a church.

Throughout our current series in Nehemiah, we've been pretty up front about the fact that in the process of expecting great things from God and attempting great things for God, it's inevitable that we will face enemy resistance along the way— resistance from Satan and the spiritual forces of darkness.

As Nehemiah led God's people in the massive project of rebuilding the broken walls and battered gates of Jerusalem, they constantly faced opposition from a host of adversaries led by a trio of bad guys named Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem, who were regional leaders that governed the lands just outside of Judah.

The presence of these adversaries in the book of Nehemiah points to the principle that when we attempt any great work for God, we are inevitably thrust into an arena of conflict, of spiritual warfare. The enemy is always on the alert, ready to undermine or even destroy any undertaking God calls us to for the sake of his restorative mission in Jesus.

Indeed, the New Testament makes it clear that our true enemies are not human beings— the Sanballats, Tobiahs and Geshems of our world. Instead, the apostle Peter tells us that we are to:

Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith...¹

While the theme of enemy resistance is already well-established in the book of Nehemiah, in chapter 6 we find that it peaks in intensity. It takes an especially subversive and sinister turn, and this leaves us with an important question: *When we attempt a great work for God, how do we resist the enemy when he does his worst to distract, delay and derail us?*

Nehemiah chapter 6 shows us two essentials for overcoming the enemy's schemes. The first has to do with *awareness* of the enemy's schemes, and the second has to do with the *countermeasures* against those schemes. Let's start with:

AWARENESS OF THE ENEMY'S SCHEMES

¹ 1 Peter 5:8-9a (NIV)

In his famous work *The Art of War*, ancient Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu wrote that, “If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat.”

There is truth in this when it comes to our battle against the spiritual forces of darkness. To succeed in spiritual warfare, we need to know our enemy. We need to be familiar with the tactics the devil likes to use against us. The way the apostle Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians, is that we can avoid being outwitted by Satan by being *aware of his schemes*.²

Drawing on our text Nehemiah 6, we’re going to briefly consider three common enemy schemes that we need to be aware of. The first is that of:

1. Targeting leaders.

In this case, the enemies of God’s people set their sights squarely on Nehemiah himself. Let’s read about it in Nehemiah’s own words, starting in chapter 6 verse 1:

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 am 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 it 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 meet together.”

I sent him this reply: “Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head.”³

The tactics that the enemies of God’s people had used in previous chapters— including threats of violence— had not worked to slow down the progress on the rebuilding project. Now, the entire project stands on the very brink of completion.

² 2 Corinthians 2:11

³ Nehemiah 6:1-8 (NIV)

The unfinished gateways represented the enemies' last hope to regain the upper hand, so they intensify their opposition, shifting to more subtle and subversive tactics, all aimed directly at Nehemiah. They knew if they could kill or discredit the leader, the rebuilding project would stall out.

Jesus himself once quoted the prophet Zechariah: *When the shepherd is struck, the sheep will be scattered.*⁴ This is precisely why the enemy likes to target leaders when God's people are attempting great things for him.

The enemies' invitation for Nehemiah to meet them for a conference on the plain of Ono about halfway between Jerusalem and Samaria appears at first glance to be quite reasonable. But Nehemiah saw it for what it was— a plot to lure him away from the city. At best, this would have had the effect of delaying the project for several days, and at worst it would have given the enemy a chance to kill Nehemiah, and conveniently blame it on bandits who often roamed the open country.

Sanballat and Geshem extend this invitation four times, but Nehemiah has none of it. So, the enemy tries another scheme to get Nehemiah to meet with them. This time, Sanballat sends one of his aids with an unsealed letter suggesting that Nehemiah is trying to make himself king over Judah so he can lead his people in a rebellion against the ruling Persian empire— which of course was totally untrue.

Note that this letter is unsealed. This means that it's an open letter, it's meant for the public domain, intended to spread malicious rumours against Nehemiah. Will he run to meet with his enemies in a desperate effort to clear his name? No. He doesn't take that bait.

A common strategy that the spiritual forces of darkness use against God's people is to strike the shepherd and scatter the sheep. This means that those of us who bear the mantle of Christian leadership have a target on our backs (yay!). But like Nehemiah, we needn't fear— there are powerful and effective countermeasures we can deploy against this and the other schemes of the enemy, and we'll consider those in just a bit. For now, keep in mind that the enemy likes to target the leaders of God's people. As well, the enemy also has a habit of:

2. Attributing to God that which is not from God.

In the next part of the chapter, Nehemiah describes an encounter he has with a prophet named Shemaiah:

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 someone like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go!" I realized that God had not sent him, but that he had prophesied against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. He had been hired to intimidate me so

⁴ Matthew 26:31; Zechariah 13:7

that I would commit a sin by doing this, and then they would give me a bad name to discredit me.⁵

One thing to note here, and throughout Nehemiah 6, is that all of the enemy's schemes involve trying to stir up *fear*— whether in Nehemiah himself or among the people of Judah.⁶ That's one way to recognize the enemy's schemes— they are designed to induce fear in us— whereas scripture says God does not give us a spirit of fear; rather, his perfect love drives fear away.⁷

Here, a Jewish prophet named Shemaiah is hired by the enemy to do what? To *intimidate* Nehemiah, by saying that someone was coming by night to assassinate him. In the guise of trying to help Nehemiah, Shemaiah suggests that Nehemiah hide with him inside the temple to avoid this fate. And while it's not as obvious in the English translation, the original Hebrew shows quite clearly that Shemaiah says all of this to Nehemiah in the form of an oracle— in the form of a prophetic word from God himself.

Except it's not a word from God at all. Nehemiah was well aware that the Torah—the Jewish law— only permitted priests to go inside the temple— and Nehemiah was no priest. In the name of God, Shemaiah was trying to trick Nehemiah into saving himself by breaking God's law. If the people had seen Nehemiah doing this, it would have totally discredited him as a leader in their eyes, and this, in turn, could have sabotaged the whole rebuilding project.

Has anyone ever tried to manipulate you by falsely invoking God's name, or by twisting scripture? Satan even used this tactic against Jesus once when tempting him in the wilderness, quoting scripture in an effort to get him to abandon his God-given identity and mission.⁸ Jesus knew better, and didn't fall for it. But attributing to God that which is not from God remains one of the devil's favourite tactics. This is why we're warned in scripture:

Dear friends, do not believe everyone who claims to speak by the Spirit. You must test them to see if the spirit they have comes from God. For there are many false prophets in the world.⁹

The third scheme the enemy commonly uses is that of:

3. Colluding with insiders.

In the last section of Nehemiah 6, we read that:

Also, in those days the nobles of Judah were sending many letters to Tobiah, and replies from Tobiah kept coming to them. For many in Judah were under oath to him, since he was son-in-law to Shekariah 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.¹⁰

⁵ Nehemiah 6:10-13 (NIV)

⁶ Nehemiah 6: 9, 13, 19

⁷ 2 Timothy 1:7; 1 John 4:18

⁸ Luke 4:9-12

⁹ 1 John 4:1 (NLT)

¹⁰ Nehemiah 6:17-19 (NIV)

Last Sunday, Pastor Kevin explained how the people of Judah shifted between fighting FOR each other and fighting WITH each other as they rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem. He pointed out that sometimes, the greatest threat to the community comes from within the community itself. The enemy, well aware of this, sometimes goes to work inside the community of God's people in an effort to divide and conquer it.

Here, we see that the nobles of Judah are in collusion with Tobiah, who, if you recall, is one of the three main bad guys throughout the book of Nehemiah. He and his son had intermarried with Jews, and in so doing Tobiah was able to establish a pathway of influence into the community of God's people. Although he was an enemy, many Jews were loyal to him, and exchanged info and intel with him about Nehemiah and the building project.

While this didn't stop the project from being completed, it was surely painful for Nehemiah to realize that active resistance to the mission to which God has called his people didn't just come from the outside. It also came from within the community of his own people.

Did not Satan use the same scheme of colluding with insiders against Jesus? The ultimate betrayal of Jesus to the authorities was an inside job by one of his twelve closest disciples.¹¹

As we seek to fulfill the mission God has given to us as a church, we need to be aware of the schemes the enemy uses against God's people—and three of the most common are *targeting the leaders*, *attributing to God what is not from God*, and *colluding with insiders*. Now, going back to our text, let's consider three:

COUNTERMEASURES AGAINST THE ENEMY'S SCHEMES

The first countermeasure is:

1. Prayer.

If you've been tracking with this series, you know that prayer has been woven throughout every chapter of Nehemiah so far. Prayer is what led to the rebuilding project in the first place, and it's what kept that project moving forward against all odds. It should come as no surprise, then, that when enemy resistance reaches its peak in chapter 6, we find Nehemiah turning to God in prayer once again.

After the efforts to lure him out of the city, and the circulation of the open letter designed to spread false rumours about him, Nehemiah says of the enemies that:

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."¹²

The metaphor of "hands" here refers to the strength of will to carry on with the mission God gives us to do. The enemy longed for the people's "hands" to be weakened, so to speak— that they would lose

¹¹ Matthew 26:14-16

¹² Nehemiah 6:9 (NIV)

heart and stop their work on the wall. But Nehemiah prays for strong hands to finish the work in the face of the enemy's scheming. And because he prayed, strength came.

As well, being a person of prayer made Nehemiah sensitive to divine guidance, including divine warnings. It was through prayer that he could discern and resist the enemies' schemes, and it is through prayer that you and I can discern and resist the enemy's schemes.

As we've seen, a common enemy scheme is to target the leaders of God's people. Therefore, one of the most important things you can do is to pray for those in church leadership. Do you pray on a regular basis for Cornerstone's Executive Team, Executive Church Board, for our staff and other leaders in the church? There may be an enemy target on our backs, but your prayers are a shield around us.

On your way out by the exit, you'll find a bunch of these little cards that have a prayer you can pray for those of us in church leadership. Take one, and put it in a place where you'll see it often, and be reminded to pray for church leaders. If you're with us online, you can download a printable copy of this card using the QR code that's onscreen.¹³ Thanks in advance for your prayer cover, especially as we look to God for the next major strategic moves he has in mind for this church.

In Ephesians 6, the apostle Paul offers the New Testament's most complete teaching on our battle against the spiritual forces of darkness. Paul exhorts us to put on the armour of God so that we can take our stand against the enemy, and he goes on to describe each piece of the armour— the shield of faith, the breastplate of righteousness, the helmet of salvation and so on. The thing is, each of these pieces of armour is a metaphor. How do you actually put on a metaphor? Paul tells us how. We put on all the armour of God through prayer. As Paul says in verse 18:

And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.¹⁴

The second countermeasure against the enemy's schemes is:

2. Scripture.

Along with prayer, the knowledge of scripture is essential for resisting the enemy's schemes. Paul calls the word of God our sword for the battle.¹⁵

Nehemiah knew his scripture, so he wasn't fooled by Shemaiah's false prophecy designed to get him to break God's law and discredit him in the eyes of God's people.

We talked about how the devil twisted scripture against Jesus to tempt him in the wilderness. How did Jesus respond? He responded by saying, "It is written," countering the enemy with more scripture, interpreted faithfully.¹⁶

¹³ www.cornerstonechurch.ca/joy

¹⁴ Ephesians 6:18 (NIV)

¹⁵ Ephesians 6:17

¹⁶ Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13

How well do you know scripture? One thing's for sure: the weaker your knowledge of scripture, the more susceptible you'll be to the enemy's schemes. To help you grow in your knowledge of scripture, I'd like to recommend one of Cornerstone's most popular downloadable resources: It's the *Practical Guide Sheet for Bible Intake*, and you'll find it at the QR code you see on the screen.¹⁷ It's loaded with tips and links to resources for hearing, reading, studying, memorizing, meditating on, and applying the Bible.

The third countermeasure against enemy resistance that we see in our passage is:

3. **Resisting self-justification.**

What if an open letter was circulated that contained false accusations or unfair characterizations about you? How would that make you feel? How would you respond to that?

Even though Nehemiah was not even remotely guilty of the accusations contained in Sanballat's open letter, it could have been a huge temptation to engage those who opposed him, asserting his innocence, demanding that the unjust accusations be withdrawn. But Nehemiah resisted any urge he might have had to do so.

It's incredibly difficult to handle unjust or unfair accusations. But God can use the experience can shape us for the better if we let him.

First, we need to honestly to examine our hearts and see if there is any truth in whatever our critics have to say about us. We need to pray along with the psalmist, "Search me oh God, and know my heart... See if there is any offensive way in me..."¹⁸

We also need to be reminded that God's word forbids retaliation, which only multiplies sin. On the contrary, because of our allegiance to Jesus who gave his life for his enemies, we are to intercede for those who falsely say all kinds of evil things against us.¹⁹

As tempted as Nehemiah might have been to argue with or take revenge on his enemies, our text shows that he simply left them to God's justice in prayer:

Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, my God, because of what they have done; remember also the prophet Noadiah and how she and the rest of the prophets have been trying to intimidate me.²⁰

In the face of false or unfair accusations, we also must show temperance in our speech. As the Bible says in Proverbs, a gentle answer turns away wrath, and someone who controls their temper is better than a warrior who takes a city.²¹

Indeed, if our conscience is our clear, it is often best not to multiply words in an effort to defend or justify ourselves. Given time and patience, false accusations and unfair characterizations are often exposed for what they are, and actually end up discrediting those who have perpetuated them.

¹⁷ <https://cornerstonechurch.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Bible-Intake-Guide-Sheet.pdf>

¹⁸ Psalm 139:23-24

¹⁹ Romans 12:17-21; Matthew 5:11

²⁰ Nehemiah 6:14 (NIV)

²¹ Proverbs 15:1; 16:31

Finally, and most importantly, resisting self-justification can deepen our intimacy with Jesus, of whom scripture says:

When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.²²

Conclusion

As the worship team makes their way back up now, let's do a brief review. Today, we have seen three enemy schemes we need to be aware of: *targeting the leaders*, *attributing to God what is not from God*, and *colluding with insiders*. As Cornerstone seeks God's longer-term vision for the church, we will be thrust into an area of spiritual conflict where we are likely to face such enemy schemes.

But we have also learned three countermeasures we can take against those schemes: *Prayer*, *scripture* and *resisting self-justification*. When we apply these countermeasures, we will be able to stand strong and united against the spiritual forces of darkness, and complete whatever great work God may call us to. Indeed, that's exactly what we see in our passage. Against all odds, Nehemiah was able to write this incredible report:

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.²³

You see, Israel was always meant to be a light to the nations, and Jerusalem was always meant to be a city that pointed to God's heart for the whole world. Through Nehemiah's awareness and countermeasures against enemy resistance, those very same enemies began to realize that the God of Israel was the real deal.

May the same be the case with Cornerstone, whatever resistance we may come up against as we attempt great things for God. In the power of the Holy Spirit, may we serve as living proof to the community and the world around us that Jesus is the real deal. Amen?

²² 2 Peter 2:23 (NIV)

²³ Nehemiah 6:15-16 (NIV)