

Nehemiah 6

Fake news

In this chapter, we finally see the completion of the wall around Jerusalem, the project Nehemiah had come to the city to complete. Moreover, we see in verse 15 that the wall was finished in only 52 days, an amazing feat for a bunch of amateurs, no matter how well organized they may have been.

So, why does Nehemiah spend just one verse on this great success? Why instead does he bury the triumph in a chapter that is otherwise taken up with the threats from his opponents? Even after he mentions the completion of the wall in verse 15, he insists on going back and giving us more detail about Tobiah's powerful allies and how he tried to keep the project from being finished. What gives?

Well, we might not like to think about this, but perhaps Nehemiah has arranged his material this way to teach us a lesson: that in this world, the fight against evil is never really over – opposition to the gospel is a constant feature of the Christian life. Just as verse 4 tells us that Nehemiah's opponents sent him letter after letter after letter after letter trying to lure him into a trap, the forces of evil never stop working against the Kingdom of God.

And just the names of Nehemiah's opponents should remind us of this. After all, we met all three of them them back in chapter 2, when Nehemiah first arrived in Judea. There, we learned that, roughly speaking, Sanballat was in charge of Samaria, the area immediately to the north of Nehemiah's district. Tobiah was in charge of the area across the Dead Sea to the northeast. And Geshem and his Arab allies controlled the area to the south and southeast. Put together, their opposition meant that Nehemiah and his people were completely surrounded by their enemies.

And all three were opposed to the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls from the beginning – probably because they didn't want another city in the region to rival their power. And since Tobiah's opposition is mentioned even after the wall's successful completion, that indicates that their hostility never really ceased. Oh, when they saw the finished wall and its restored gates they may have been "cast down in their own eyes," as verse 16 says. They may have been disappointed – they may even have had their confidence shaken. But that doesn't mean they ever approved of the project, or desired the welfare of God's people that a completed wall would help insure. Enemies they were, and enemies they remained.

So, what does all this mean for us? Well, God has also given us a great work to do - to spread the gospel and bring glory to God by loving Him and loving our neighbors. As Jesus told us, we are called to make disciples, teaching them to observe everything that He has taught us. We are called to persevere in fervent prayer that God's glory would increase as more and more people come to know Christ as Lord, and as the people of God demonstrate His character through holy living each and every day.

But as Paul reminds us in our Responsive Reading, as we seek to live the Christian life and to tear down every stronghold standing in opposition to the truth of Christ, we don't just wrestle against flesh and blood, but against Satan himself. And just as Nehemiah's opponents kept trying to frustrate his plans throughout this chapter, Satan still has all sorts of ways to try to keep us from doing the work that God has called us to do. So let's see what lessons we can learn from Nehemiah's experience that can help us stand firm against Satan's lies.

For lies, or what's now more commonly called "fake news," are at the heart of everything Nehemiah's enemies say and do. In verse 2, Sanballat and Geshem begin with a simple invitation to a meeting at Ono – that seems harmless enough. After all, Ono was on the border between the areas governed by Sanballat and Nehemiah, so a meeting there was literally an attempt to meet Nehemiah halfway. And if, after the meeting, Nehemiah were to come to the conclusion that Sanballat and Geshem weren't really so bad, that they could all get along together, then why should he insist on finishing the wall anyway? What could be wrong with a little friendly negotiation?

Well, there's nothing wrong with it – if you are dealing with people who are negotiating in good faith. But remember, this wasn't Nehemiah's first rodeo with these cowboys. No, his enemies had begun in chapter 2 simply by laughing at the idea that Jerusalem's wall could be rebuilt. By chapter 4, they had formed an active conspiracy and were making such credible threats against the workmen that Nehemiah had to completely reorganize his work crews to make sure they were safe from enemy attacks. So, now that the wall was almost finished, why should Nehemiah believe that their attitude toward the project had suddenly changed? No, he wasn't just being paranoid when he smelled a rat at the end of verse 2. He was right to consider Sanballat's offer as "fake news."

And the same thing is true for us. For Satan's attempts to distract us from Kingdom work often seem all too reasonable. I mean, do we really need to go all-in for God and for others, or wouldn't it make more sense to take care of ourselves first? So, why shouldn't we take a break sometimes from the work to which God has called us? Why shouldn't we make just a few compromises with wickedness? Why shouldn't we meet the godless world halfway? Does it really make sense to try to build the kingdom of God when everything in the culture around us is working in the opposite direction? Isn't despair and discouragement the rational response to overwhelming problems?

Sure, all those lies of Satan make sense to human reason, just as eating that fruit in the Garden of Eden made sense to Adam and Eve. But that's why Paul reminded us in our responsive reading that we need to put on the whole armor of God everyday. That's why we need to cover ourselves with truth, because Satan's lies are so plausible. That's why we need faith in God, because the flaming darts of the evil one, the deceit and the despair and the discouragement he flings at us make so much sense.

So, instead of believing the "fake news," instead of negotiating with his enemies, Nehemiah simply reminded them in verse 3 of the importance of the work that faced him. His task was simply too urgent for him to pause and consider the arguments of his enemies. Just so, if we keep our eyes on the work Jesus has set before us, to pray for the lost, to make disciples of all the nations, to show His love for the world as we love our neighbors, and by doing all this to love God with everything we are and everything we have, we won't have much time or inclination to compromise with wickedness, will we?

Well, when a veneer of reasonableness didn't fool Nehemiah, his opponents quickly shifted tactics. The fifth letter they sent contained a different sort of "fake news." No longer were they trying to conceal their hostility – now, it poured out on every page. Now, the lies were blatant, accusing Nehemiah of treason, saying that the only reason he wanted the wall rebuilt was so that he could rebel against the Persian Empire, insisting that he wanted to become king himself.

And who was saying all these things? Verse 6 points to the heathen, the pagan nations surrounding Jerusalem. And of course whether these lies had spread very far before Sanballat wrote

them down, the fact that he sent them in an open letter would be a sure-fire way to get the gossip train moving.

So let's grant for the sake of argument that at least part of this letter was accurate, the part that insisted that all the godless nations around Judea thought Nehemiah was a traitorous rebel. Well, there are still plenty of lies about Christians going around today, aren't they? Lots of people outside the Church think that our attempts at holy living make us a bunch of killjoys, trying to ruin everyone else's fun. Others insist that we are nothing more than fakers, feigning holiness on the outside, while being just as selfish as anyone else is on the inside. Hypocrites – that's what they call us, especially when our lives don't live up to the standard of unconditional, self-sacrificial love that Jesus set for us, the standard that we claim to believe.

Okay, so how did Nehemiah respond to the charge of treason? He didn't debate whether lots of people actually believed all these lies or not. And he didn't criticize Sanballat for sending an open letter so that everyone could read this fake news. Instead, in verse 8, he simply responded with the truth: he insisted that he wasn't trying to rebel against the Persian king. He said he was not, in fact, building a wall around Jerusalem in order to increase his own power or establish his own kingdom. And when we combine his straightforward words with the astonishingly selfless deeds recorded at the end of chapter 5, when we remember that he was personally bankrolling the entire cost of the local government so that the wall-building project could proceed, his words became much more believable, didn't they?

In the same way, the only way we can stand up to the sorts of lies the world tells about us is to respond with the truth. In both word and deed we must testify that we are not following Jesus because of what we can get out of the deal. We aren't just trying to bring more people into the church so we can fill up our offering plates and our committees. No, we must proclaim and demonstrate Christ's love for sinners, devoting ourselves completely to the glory of God and to the good of others, desiring only that others receive the same gift Christ has given to us by His free grace – the gift of Himself. But of course, that will only work if it's true....

And that brings us to the third and the most devastating of Satan's attacks on the church – infiltration. For the fact is that even some of those who claim to be Christians are in fact living on the world's terms, loyal not to King Jesus, but only to themselves. That was certainly the case in Nehemiah's time.

For when he went to visit his sick friend in verse 10, think about what Shemaiah did: he tried to frighten Nehemiah into taking refuge within the Temple itself. Again, this might have made sense in exclusively worldly terms. The Temple was, in fact, a very sturdy building, strong enough to protect Nehemiah from anything his enemies might have tried to do to him. The only problem was that God's law allowed only the priests to enter the Temple – and Nehemiah wasn't a priest. In short, Shemaiah wanted Nehemiah to put his own self-preservation ahead of his obedience to God. But once again – it was fake news. There actually wasn't any imminent danger – Sanballat and Tobiah had paid Shemaiah to concoct this lie.

But Shemaiah wasn't the only one of God's people who colluded with God's enemies. The very end of the chapter reminds us that Tobiah was quite well connected – his son had married the daughter of a very prominent man. And if we go forward to chapter 13, we find that Sanballat was in a similar situation – his daughter had married the son of the high priest. And the same sad situation remains today. There are still people who claim to follow Jesus but who prefer the things of this world to the things of God. And as we know all too well, such worldly thinking can infect even the highest courts of a

denomination. As a result, we can even find “fake news” being spread even by the highest denominational officials.

So, how do we respond to these sorts of lies? If the answer to deceptive temptations to compromise is to maintain our focus on our mission, and if the answer to lies spreading outside the Church is to live a more consistently Christian life, then the only response to collusion and corruption within the Church is to renew our focus on our identity as the people of God. And that’s exactly what Nehemiah did in verse 11. In the first place, the fact that he belonged to God meant he had no reason to fear his enemies’ threats– he had no need to hide in the Temple because he was confident that God would protect him. But at the same time, precisely because he belonged to God, he dared not enter the Temple because he knew it was not allowed – he could not presume to break God’s Law. In other words, he had a healthy balance between confidence in his status as a child of God and proper humility as an obedient servant of the King of Kings.

And come to think of it, maybe that’s the best reason that Nehemiah didn’t begin this chapter by trumpeting his big achievement. He was too focused on his mission, too determined to live a consistent Christian witness, too confident and at the same time too humble to dwell too much on either his problems or his achievements. Instead, as the end of verse 16 puts it plainly, he gave all the glory to God for the completion of the project, even as he cried out to God in verse 9 to strengthen him in the face of continuing opposition. Trusting God and obeying His commandments everyday – that sounds like a good recipe for Christian living, doesn’t it?