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Attempts to Snare Nehemiah
Nehemiah 6: 1-9

Attempts to snare Nehemiah DIG: As the rebuilding project is almost over, what final threats does Nehemiah face from Sanballat, Tobiah and their cohorts? What does the proposed meeting purport to be? Why does Nehemiah suspect otherwise? Even if it were sincere or well-intentioned, how does Nehemiah not let the "good" get in the way the "better?" What impact does the "unsealed letter" intended to have on the public at large? On the ruling Persian king? Do you think Nehemiah was really scared? Why? Why not? How does he face those who would slander him?

REFLECT: How complete is your defense against those who would sidetrack you? What weak spots in the wall of your heart need shoring up? In going about doing good, when have you been tempted to settle for second best? Why don't you drop some merely good projects and attempts a truly great project, worthy of your best effort?

445 BC During the ministry of Nehemiah (**to see link click Bt – The Third Return**).
Compiled by: The Chronicler from the Ezra and Nehemiah Memoirs (see **Ac – Ezra-Nehemiah From a Jewish Perspective: The Nehemiah Memoirs**)**.**

The average person doesn't realize the tremendous pressures and testings that people experience day after day in positions in leadership. Leaders are often blamed for things they didn't do and criticized for things they tried to do. They are misquoted and misunderstood and rarely given the opportunity to set the record straight. If they act quickly, they are reckless; if they bide their time, they are cowardly or unconcerned.[255]

As a result, if you are a leader, you spend your time either on top or on the bottom. You're either a hero or a villain; respected or reviled. Rarely anything between those two extremes. People in leadership must live on the yo-yo of public opinion;

the target for cheap shots on the bottom, the object of great admiration on the upside. The outhouse is difficult to endure. But it's when we are under the verbal attack that we show our true colors.



After overcoming internal economic obstacles **(5:1-19)**, **the wall** was finished except for **the gates**. **Now it was reported to Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem** (**to see link click Cc – Samaritan Opposition to the Building of the Walls of Jerusalem**)**, and the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall and no breach remained in it – even though, at that time, I had not positioned the doors in the gates. Sanballat and Geshem** attempted to lure **him** outside **the City** to kill **him**. **They sent word to Nehemiah,** saying: **Come, let us meet together in one of the villages in the plain of Ono,** south of Joppa on the western coast of Judah **(Nehemiah 6:1-2). But they were scheming to do me harm.** Even though **he** had been a faithful, stable, and consistent leader, a plot to defeat **him** was underway.

The attack on **Nehemiah** was very significant because it happened at a very crucial time in **his** life. **He** was nearly finished with the greatest task that **the citizens** of **Yerushalayim** had seen in **their** generation. Not very long before **they** were ready to cut the ribbon and have a joyous celebration, **Nehemiah** was most vulnerable. **In the eleventh example of leadership in the life of Nehemiah, wise leaders must watch out that they don't fall** (see **Bt – The Third Return**)**.** So often the vulnerable person isn't the one who stumbles, but the one who thinks he or she isn't capable of falling.

The Scriptures tell us of failures that happened from time to time. When did Bathsheba cross the gaze of **David**. At a time when he was undefeated in battle. From the time he was crowned king until he fell with Bathsheba, **David** had not known defeat – politically, militarily, or personally. When did **Jonah** fall into self-pity? After the greatest revival that Nineveh had ever seen. When was **Joseph** tempted by Mrs. Potiphar? Soon after **he** had been promoted by under Mr. Potiphar

and given a leadership position.[256]

Nehemiah was already planning the dedication service for the completed wall when **the enemy** attacked. **They** offered to meet **him** in a **village** halfway between **Jerusalem** and Samaria, a quiet place where **they** could make plans on how to supposedly work together. Of course, the enemy's strategy was, "If you can't beat'em, join'em" (and then take over later). Once the Enemy of souls gets a foothold in a ministry, he starts to weaken it from within, and ultimately, the ministry will fail. While cooperation in **the Lord's** work is a noble thing, leaders must take care that they cooperate with the right people at the right time for the right reasons, otherwise they may end up cooperating with the Enemy. The Adversary is a master deceiver and has his servants ready to join hands with **God's people** so he can weaken **their** hands in **their** work **(Second Corinthians 11:13-15)**.

Loving compromise and cooperation can be good and useful if there are no moral or spiritual issues involved. Happy compromise can invigorate a marriage or strengthen a ministry **(Philippians 1:1-4)**, but this is a compromise among people who love each other and have the same purposes in mind. When you invite the devil to join your team; however, expect him to change the rules and the goals, and expect to be defeated.[257]

Nehemiah's answer was immediate and unflinching. **He** knew **his enemies** were trying to lure **him** into a trap, **so he sent messengers to them** saying: **I am doing an important work, so I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you (Nehemiah 6:3)?** There is no mention of his suspicions as to their real intent. This is **Nehemiah** the politician – astute and resolute. Naivete here would have proved disastrous. There is **a time to keep silent, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace (Ecclesiastes 3:7-8).** A politician, no less than a lowly believer, must be able to discern the appropriate occasion for each response.[258]

On **their** next attempt, **they** tried a different approach. By that time, **Sanballat and Geshem** had dropped their pretense of friendliness and tried to spread rumors that would damage **Nehemiah's** reputation. **Nehemiah's enemies** were nothing if not persistent. **They sent me the same message four times, and each time I returned a similar response to them. But the fifth time Sanballat sent his young aide to me in this way, he had an open letter in his hand (Nehemiah**

6:4-5). An open letter to a royal governor would be both intimidating and insulting. Official letters were typically rolled up and sealed with an official signet by the letter's sender or one of his assisting officials. An open or unsealed letter was not only a sign of disrespect and open criticism but also suggested the information therein was public knowledge, a vicious way to attack a leader. The goal of this document was to intimidate **Nehemiah** into stopping the work.[259]

Things were no longer so cordial, and **Nehemiah's** suspicions were proved to be well founded. **In it was written, "It has been heard among the nations – and Geshem substantiates it – that you and the Jews are planning to revolt. That is why you are rebuilding the wall (Nehemiah 6:6a).** The letter suggested that **Nehemiah's** intent to revolt was common knowledge that would get back to the king of Persia if **he** did not come to the requested conference. It would have been considered a serious charge in Nehemiah's day, because Persian kings tolerated no resistance from their subjects. This information, had it been true, would have brought Persian troops against **the Jews**. Even though Judah had a reputation for breaking its allegiance with its overlord kings, on this occasion that was not the case.[260]

Sanballat wanted the public to know the contents of the letter because **he** hoped to undermine **Nehemiah's** reputation and authority. **Furthermore, according to these reports, you are to become their king and have even prophets to make this proclamation about you in Jerusalem saying, 'There is a king [Nehemiah] in Judah.' Now, the king is going to hear about these reports. So come now! Let us confer together" (Nehemiah 6:6b-7).** If some of the Jewish workers believed what was in the letter, **Sanballat** could organize them and create division within the ranks. It was a splendid opportunity for the enemy to divide and conquer. In addition, if there were such **prophets**, **Sanballat** had actually hired **them** to feed incorrect information, thus generating the false rumor. By allowing **the** false **prophets** to make public statements that **Nehemiah** had made **himself king**, **Sanballat** hoped to make it appear that **the Jews** were supplanting Persian rule.[261]

Leaders must know how to handle false accusations, vicious letters, unfounded press reports and plain old gossip. Otherwise, these devilish weapons will sidetrack them and they will lose their perspective and spend so much time defending themselves that they will neglect their ministry. How would **Nehemiah** react? It is legitimate to defend oneself against inaccurate slander, but it is often better to

ignore it if possible. Knowing the accusations were lies, **Nehemiah** was able to simply deny them and go about **his** work. **He** knew **his** character was such that no honest person would believe the false reports. If we take care of our character, we can trust **God** to take care of our reputation.[262]

Then Nehemiah sent a message to Sanballat and Geshem, saying: **Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are devising them from your own heart.** Basically, **Nehemiah** effectively called **their** bluff, confident in **his** relationship with **the king** (see **Bv – Favor with King Artakh'shasta**), and **his** correct assessment of the situation, namely that **the plotters** were merely trying to **intimidate the Jews** in the hope that the resulting discouragement would grind **the wall** project to a halt. **For Sanballat and Geshem the Arabian, and the rest of our enemies were all trying to intimidate us, thinking, "Their hands will become weak from the work and it will not be done" (Nehemiah 6:8-9a).**[263]

The urgency of the situation, as well as **Nehemiah's** implicit trust, are both underscored by the concluding prayer. This is the seventh of twelve **prayers** recorded in **Nehemiah (9:5ff, 1:5-11, 2:4, 4:4, 4:9, 5:19,** here, **6:14, 13:14, 13:22, 13:29,** and **13:31). So now, ADONAI, strengthen my hands (Nehemiah 6:9b)! Nehemiah's** response is an example of how believers should respond to such things: not with retaliation and revenge but with patient and careful denial. And like **the Psalmist** before **him**, **Nehemiah** found strength and refuge by leaning on **the LORD** in **his** trouble. If **his enemies'** words could not be trusted, the words of **God** are a source of balm and comfort:

ADONAI, let me not be ashamed, for I have called upon You. Let the wicked be ashamed – let them be silent in Sh'ol. Let the lying lips be mute. For they speak arrogantly against the righteous, with pride and contempt. How great is Your goodness, which You have stored up for those who fear You, which You have given to those who take refuge in You, before the children of men (Psalm 31:18-20).

For the wicked and the deceitful have opened their mouth against me. They spoke to me with a lying tongue, with hateful words surrounded me, and fought against me without cause. In return for my love they are my accusers, but I am in prayer (Psalm 109:2-4).

Nehemiah's resort to prayer – **So now, ADONAI, strengthen my hands –** was in

itself a confession of **his** weakness. **He** keenly felt the biting allegation and the possibility that once made there are always those who are willing to believe it in the spirit the worst in people. No matter what **Nehemiah** said from that time forward, there would always be the possibility that **Artakh'shasta** would harbor doubts about **Nehemiah's** true intentions. And not just **the king**, but **his** own friends! Would they, too, now have doubts concerning what this project had ultimately been about? If **Nehemiah** could not be certain of what **his** friends or **his king** might now be thinking about **his** true motive in rebuilding **the walls** of **Yerushalayim, he** could always be certain that **YHVH** is without guile and that **his** cries would ascend to **Him** and be heard in heaven. **God** knew **Nehemiah's** heart.[264]