

# Nehemiah 6-7

*Lesson 6 Fall 2013 Series 5*

The defense works had now reached a critical stage in the protection of Jerusalem. They were nearing completion and all could now be either lost or won. The open gateways made the city still very vulnerable to attack, once they were closed Jerusalem provides a considerable amount of protection and a siege would be necessary in order to capture the city. Such a siege would be out of the question among fellow members of the Persian Empire as it would certainly draw the attention of the King of Persia.<sup>1</sup> He would then almost certainly have interceded with decisive force against any perceived aggressor. The report, that the wall was nearing completion, will draw a response from Sanballat and Geshem in the form of an invitation to come and meet with them. This is only a very thinly veiled attempt to intimidate

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, in the Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries series (Downers Grove IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009), p. 107.

or even to kill Nehemiah who had dealt so masterfully with the internal dissent up to this point.

Verse 2 indicates that their intent was to harm Nehemiah. The response from Nehemiah is a refusal of their invitation and this thwarts their first attempt to lure Nehemiah outside the protection of the city wall. They continue to attempt to entice him to meet them outside the wall a total of four times (verse 4). Finally on the fifth time Sanballat sends a letter that contains an accusation that Israel intends to rebel against Persia (verses 5 and 6). He also accuses Nehemiah of setting up prophets to proclaim that there is a king and Jerusalem, and that the king is Nehemiah. With these threatening accusations Sanballat once again issues his invitation to come and meet with him (verse 7). Nehemiah confidently stands his ground, refutes the accusations indicating that he perceives Sanballat's motives in making the accusations (verses 8-9). His reply to Sanballat abandons the efforts to diffuse the situation with

diplomatic niceties and calls his bluff. Nehemiah knows that Sanballat has no evidence to substantiate his accusation before the king and he was also confident in his relationship with King Artaxerxes. He ends here with an appeal to God to strengthen their hands. He knows that this is the real key to their success and the source of their strength.<sup>2</sup> Nehemiah continues to retain his focus, especially in moments of crisis.

Verses 10-14 - The next incident related by Nehemiah deals with his visit to the house of Shemaiah. All we know of this Shemaiah is what is written here and we are told that he was confined to his house (verse 10). Shemaiah delivers to Nehemiah words that he claims are a prophecy concerning a plot to kill him. He pleads for Nehemiah to meet with him in the temple behind closed doors for his own protection.<sup>3</sup> It should be a warning and an encouragement for us today that when we are

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, in the Concordia Commentary series (Saint Louis MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), pp. 463-465.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 465.

involved in kingdom work there will be resistance and it will, very often, be shrewd, manifold, and persistent. We should be consistently aware that the forces opposed to God's people and his plan will seek every opportunity to introduce dissension and block, delay, or even destroy the work of God.

The response of Nehemiah indicates that running and hiding in the temple would be demeaning for a man in his position. As the legally appointed governor of Judea such a response would truly be cowardly and self-interested. As we have already seen from the narrative here this response is incompatible with what we have been told of Nehemiah. From another perspective the request from Shemaiah is inappropriate too because the temple sanctuary was reserved for the priests because of its proximity to the Holy of Holies. Seeking sanctuary here would place Nehemiah in danger with God as it was necessary even for the priests to make special preparations in order to enter here (cf. Exodus

20:18-21; 33:20; Numbers 18:7; Deuteronomy  
5:22-27; Judges 13:22; 2 Chronicles 26:16-21;  
Hebrews 9:6 and more).<sup>4</sup>

A remarkable thing happens during the unfolding of this passage in verse 12 we are told that Nehemiah “perceived” (נָכַר) (ἐπιγινώσκω - LXX) that is he came to recognize that Shemaiah had not been sent to him by God at all. This is such an important notation. Knowing the motivation for people doing things is critical in making good decisions. We are not here told how Nehemiah came to this realization, but his discernment provided him with critical guidance at this important juncture. If indeed Shemaiah was encouraging Nehemiah to act in a manner that was not proper before God this would provide the answer as to why he was able to quickly “perceive” that the information he was being told was not from God.<sup>5</sup> Here is additional motivation for

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<sup>4</sup> H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, in the Word Biblical Commentary series, Vol. 16 (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, 1985), p. 259.

<sup>5</sup> H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, p. 259.

knowing the scriptures because they are an extremely important source for knowing God and his nature.

This would not however, explain how Nehemiah was able to find out that Shemaiah had actually been hired by Tobiah and Sanballat for this purpose (verses 12-13). These enemies of Nehemiah did these things in order to attack the reputation of Nehemiah and in order to taunt (תָּרַף) him. They wanted Nehemiah discredited. This was their primary focus at this point. They recognized his crucial place in the implementation of the project to rebuild Jerusalem.

Nehemiah once again turns to the true source of his strength and protection in prayer to God. He lifts up the names of Tobiah and Sanballat to God for remembrance. The remembrance here is a call for justice and not for blessing for these two men who had repeatedly proven themselves to be enemies of God. He also includes the name of the “prophetess” (נְבִיאָה) Noadiah and the indication that there were others who were, in truth, false prophets,

who had the intention of making Nehemiah afraid.

Although there are false prophets mentioned in other parts of the Old Testament this is the first indication of them in the time and context of Ezra-Nehemiah.<sup>6</sup>

Only four other women in the Old Testament are called a “prophetess”: Miriam (Exodus 15:20); Deborah (Judges 4:4); Huldah (2 Kings 22:14; 2 Chronicles 34:22); and Isaiah’s wife (Isaiah 8:3).<sup>7</sup> It seems probable that the order of prophets regularly included women in its numbers according to Coggins.<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that though Noadiah was singled out for mention the plot by Tobiah and Sanballat evidently also included other prophets who were a part of this plot to cause Nehemiah to be afraid. The fact that Nehemiah is aware of the plot is at least one indication that it was not successful, but additional indication will come in the narrative that follows.

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<sup>6</sup> Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, pp. 466-467.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 466.

<sup>8</sup> R. J. Coggins, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, in *The Cambridge Bible Commentary on the English Bible Series* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 97.

Verses 15-19 - We are told that the wall was completed in only fifty-two days. It should be remembered that some restoration work had already been undertaken earlier (Ezra 4:12). In addition to this it was probably the case that the pre-exilic wall was probably still extant in some places and only needed remedial work, and for small breeches to be filled. The date for finishing the wall would be October 2, 445 BC, with the start date for the wall being August 12, 445 BC. Rebuilding the wall in such a short period of time is perhaps remarkable for a variety of possible reasons. 1. It perhaps indicates that the wall was not really that big of problem and the real issues was actually morale and teamwork. 2. Perhaps the task was not actually that small and it was through a miracle of God that the work was completed in such a short period of time. 3. Perhaps this story is an indication that adversity can be overcome when people focus upon God as the source of their strength. It should be remembered that



Sanballat had assembled a coalition to surround Jerusalem on all sides (Nehemiah 4:7-8).<sup>9</sup>

The reaction to the completion of the wall was twofold: 1. When Israel's enemies heard of the completion they "were afraid." 2. They greatly fell in "their own esteem." Rather than leaving us to wonder at why there was this reaction Nehemiah tells us why. The enemies of Israel perceived that the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem had been accomplished with the help of God (verse 16). Their fear was not so much a fear of the Israelites, but in the fact that God was assisting them. Perhaps they were still familiar with the stories of the Exodus account and those from the time of Joshua where the hand of God had been with Israel in such mighty ways. Whatever the case the people living around Israel still held God in enough esteem to fear him.

Despite the fear inspired by Yahweh among the people who surrounded Israel there were those

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<sup>9</sup> Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 469.

within Israel who still had strong ties with Tobiah, they had sworn an oath to him (verse 18), they wrote letters to him (verse 17), they praised him before Nehemiah, and they spied for Tobiah by reporting the words of Nehemiah to him. Tobiah in turn sent letters to Nehemiah with the intent of intimidating him.

Without a doubt this internal division was a serious threat to the security and the future of Israel as a people. Despite all of this Nehemiah appears undeterred in his resolve to complete the task before him; a task that he believes is a task set to him and sustained by God. The faith of Nehemiah continues to carry him through the difficult and dangerous circumstances of life and it is of note that, as yet, he holds the secular power available to him in reserve.

7:1-4 - Upon completion of the walls, with the gates and gatekeepers in place, Nehemiah appoints his brother to be in charge of the city. There was still danger of attack and he realized that not all of the danger was on the outside of the wall. He chose

Hananiah because he was a “faithful man and feared God more than many.” Nehemiah understands the importance of these attributes in the appointment of the person to protect the city. He chooses to highlight this aspect over other skills that Hananiah may have had. This is the central focus of Nehemiah: trust in God.

On top of these safeguards, Nehemiah gives orders that the gates of the city are not to be opened too early in the day and they and the gates were to be carefully guarded as there was still concern over an attack. The guards were to be those with a vested interest in protecting the city, they were to be inhabitants of Jerusalem. They were to be placed at a variety of places around the city. The city was sparsely populated and very susceptible to attack. There was also reason to be concerned with a very real and powerful internal threat that is very often more dangerous and far more debilitating than an external threat.

7:5-69 - Nehemiah seeks to secure the city of Jerusalem and in order to do that the population must be increased. Currently no new houses were being built in Jerusalem. There were those that had previously been built by those who returned from captivity some nine decades earlier. From the list of those building the wall in Nehemiah 3, it appears that most of the houses were located on the east side of the city and were occupied by priests and Levites. It is also likely that there were some merchants living inside the city. The list of new residents recruited by Nehemiah (11:1-20) only amounts 3,044 new men to settle into the city. Since only the men are counted, it could be that there were between 10,000 and 15,000 new residents for Jerusalem. There appear to have been many of the previous returnees living outside the city wall before Nehemiah comes. It is likely that the city had been greatly depopulated with the destruction of the city wall. Estimates are that when Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem the population may

have been as low as 1,000 people. The majority of these were priests and Levites, who appear to have remained because of the temple.<sup>10</sup>

Having walls around the city was not enough to make it either secure or to enable it to prosper.

Having an adequate population was essential for the well-being of the city. In verse 5 we once again have an indication that Nehemiah is keenly aware of the role of God in his life. He notes that it was God who put it in his mind to assemble the nobles and officials to be enrolled by genealogy. The returnees are then listed by descent (7:8-24), by city (7:25-38), temple personnel, and those of royal descent (7:39-60), those that could not prove their lineage (7:61-65), and then the totals along with their live property are given (7:66-69).<sup>11</sup>

7:70-72 - Next is recorded the voluntary offerings for the temple. These offerings not only testify to the generosity of the people they also are a

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<sup>10</sup> Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, pp. 497-498.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, pp. 498-499.

testament to the affluence of the people. It should also be remembered that much of this wealth was given to the returnees by their neighbors, as was requested in the decree of Cyrus (Ezra 1:4,6).<sup>12</sup> It is noteworthy that special effort is made to list the priestly robes as the focus continues to be on those things which relate to God.

7:73 - The final notice in this long list of people is that they settled in their own towns. This is a reclaiming of the promise made to God's people through Jeremiah to bring the people back to the land once given to them (Jeremiah 30:3; cf. also Jeremiah 16:15; 24:6; 27:22; 29:10-14). By claiming their ancestral land they were acknowledging the faithfulness of God in the fulfillment of his promise to them.<sup>13</sup> The focus in the book of Nehemiah continues to be on the faithfulness and power of God. This is a remarkably powerful force for uniting the people of God and inspiring them to risk wild things and the

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<sup>12</sup> Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 500.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 500.

safety of the familiar, for something more, something based on the words of God who calls his people to trust him beyond common sense and challenges them to step into the realm of faith. Faith in a mighty and faithful God who continually blesses those who trust him.

## Synopsis

One of the major themes in this section is the contrast between the response of the enemies of God which is to scheme and plot and the response of Nehemiah to stand face on a course he knows is Godly, though potentially very much personally dangerous. They attempt repeatedly to entice Nehemiah into a meeting and then resort to threatening a scandal if he does not meet with them. They sought to incite fear and intimidate Nehemiah who relies upon God and trusts and fears God more than he does the men around him. Even those inside Israel are recruited to try to entice Nehemiah into a cowardly and illegal act to protect his own life. They even uses prophets within Israel to convince Nehemiah that this message is from God to flee to the safety of the temple sanctuary. None of this works and causes him to be afraid.



When the wall is finished it is amazing that the response that Sanballat and Tobiah were trying to elicit in Nehemiah, actually comes to rest on them. They are afraid and perhaps this is what makes them all the more dangerous. Nehemiah uses the skills given to him by God once more and sets in place a plan to provide additional protection for the city while also recruiting more inhabitants, which will bring both security and the potential for a healthy economy. This chapter ends with a new level of stability and strength established in the midsts of God's people.

## Main Points

1. Fear of God is a source of great strength and power.
2. God is the true source of success in the endeavors of the kingdom of God.
3. It is important to use the assets and skills that God gives in service of God.
4. Fear of God can be both positive and negative.

# Questions

1. Why do you think Sanballat fears the wall of Jerusalem being completed?
2. How do you think Nehemiah knew that the invitation from Sanballat was a trap?
3. Why do you think that Sanballat thought he could make Nehemiah afraid?
4. What is fear?
5. Why does intimidation sometimes work?
6. How do you know if a prophet is telling the truth or is false?
7. What is a prophet?
8. What is the source of the power of a country?
9. What attributes are the most important in choosing a friend, a spouse, a church? Why?
10. How do you claim the promises of God today?
11. What are some ways that people reject the promises of God today?