RESISTING SATAN’S SCHEMES

Nehemiah 6:1-19

By

Steven J. Cole

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Since September 11, 2001, Americans have had to live under the threat of terrorist attacks. It has changed many aspects of the way we live. We face increased security checks at airports and international borders. We hear of possible attacks at shopping malls and sporting events, although I’m not sure what we’re supposed to do about it, other than report suspicious looking characters or abandoned packages. It is difficult and frustrating for our government to fight this enemy, because it is often not visible as other enemy armies have been. This enemy hides and uses surprise attacks to achieve its evil goals.

The threat of terrorist attacks should not be anything new for Christians. Centuries ago, the apostle Paul warned, “Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil” (Eph. 6:11). Our enemy has used deception, trickery, and other schemes to try to destroy or at least neutralize God’s people from doing what He has called them to do. If we want to finish our course and accomplish His purpose for our lives, we must learn how to resist Satan’s schemes.

In his goal of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, Nehemiah had to stand up to the violent threats of the enemy (chapter 4). He had to deal with internal conflict between the wealthy and poor Jews (chapter 5). He is almost done now. The breaches in the wall have been repaired, and the wall is complete except for the doors in the gates. But the enemy has not given up. In chapter 6, he hits again with four schemes: intrigue (6:1-4); innuendo (6:5-9); intimidation (6:10-14); and, infiltration (6:15-19). (The first three headings are from Cyril Barber, cited by Edwin Yamauchi, Expositor’s Bible Commentary 4:712.) In the first three schemes, Satan moved first and Nehemiah had to respond. In the last situation, Nehemiah won the victory of the completed wall, but Satan responded with his scheme of infiltration. We learn that …

To complete the work God has given us to do, we must discern and resist Satan’s many schemes.

The local Samaritan Daily Sun might have reported the incident like this:

**Nehemiah Says No to Ono**

Samaritan officials have disclosed that Nehemiah, governor of Judah, has again turned down the offer of Governor Sanballat of Samaria to meet at one of the villages in Ono, on the Judah-Samaria border. The proposed conference would include the Big Four of the area: Geshem, leader of the Arabs; Tobiah, leader of the Ammonites; Sanballat, and Nehemiah.

Sanballat issued a statement today in which he sharply criticized Nehemiah for his repeated refusals to cooperate. He reports that the purpose of such a meeting would be to work on a formula for lasting peace in the region. The Samaritan leader said with evident frustration, “This is the fourth time Nehemiah has turned down my invitation to meet and discuss our mutual concerns. These repeated refusals mean that the responsibility for increasing tensions and any violence that may result, rests solely upon Jerusalem.” (Adapted from Donald Campbell, Nehemiah: Man in Charge [Victor Books], p. 55.)

Sounds like today’s news, doesn’t it! Note Satan’s first scheme:

A. Satan especially targets leaders with his schemes of intrigue.

You’ve probably seen the Gary Larsen “Far Side” cartoon that shows two deer standing upright. One has a huge target on his chest. The other one says, “Bummer of a birthmark, Ernie!” Every Christian leader has that target on his chest. If Satan can bring down the leader, he will cause extensive damage to the flock. But whether you’re a leader or not, the enemy uses the same schemes to try to sabotage your walk with God. Note two things:

(1) Satan uses subtle deception and plausible sounding appeals, but his intent is to destroy us.

“Come, let’s meet together. We should try to iron out our differences. You’re in favor of peace, aren’t you? Don’t you want good relationships with your neighbors? We just want to foster
mutual understanding.” It all sounded so good, but Nehemiah rightly perceived that their intent was to ambush him if he went.

Satan still uses all sorts of innocent-sounding appeals to lure believers into a trap. He isn’t playing games: he wants to devour you (1 Pet. 5:8). I have seen him repeatedly use the trap of luring a Christian young person (usually a woman) into marriage with an unbeliever. Of course the unbeliever is always a nice guy! A drunken, abusive bum wouldn’t lure you into the trap! But a nice, good-looking, successful unbeliever who promises to go to church with you, will do the trick just fine!

Many pastors and Christian leaders get lured into Satan’s trap of compromising sound doctrine for the cause of unity. I have heard over and over again, “The Bible does not say that the world will know us for our correct doctrine, but for our love. We need to set aside the matters that divide us and come together on the matters we agree on.” And so pastors set aside the essentials of the gospel, that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, apart from our merit or works. They join with Roman Catholics, who preach a “gospel” of works, by signing unity documents and attending unity services. Charles Colson, who is a leader in this deception, tells with approval the story of an Evangelical Free pastor who swapped pulpits with a Roman Catholic priest, to show that “what binds us together is stronger than that which divides us” (The Body [Word], p. 103).

What Colson fails to see is that what divides us is nothing less than the gospel. The divide means either heaven or hell! The apostle Paul strongly opposed the Judaizers. These men claimed to believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior. They believed that He is the Jewish Messiah. Why, then, did Paul oppose them? Because they said that in addition to believing in Jesus, you had to be circumcised to be saved. They added this one biblical work to faith, that’s all. And Paul said, “Let them be damned” (Gal. 1:8, 9). He said that if you add any human work in order to be justified, you are severed from Christ, you have fallen from grace (Gal. 5:4). Satan’s aim is to destroy you through subtle deception and plausible sounding appeals. “Are you against Christian unity? What’s wrong with you?”

(2) Satan is relentlessly persistent in his schemes.
They sent messengers to Nehemiah four times with the same invitation. Four times he sent back the same answer, “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?” (6:3). “What part of no don’t you understand?”

Just because you resist the devil once, don’t think that he is going to give up and leave you alone! He will hit you again and again with the same temptation, to wear you down. Look at how Delilah wore Samson out with the same request, to tell her the secret of his strength. Finally, he yielded and the enemy triumphed. His life was a disgrace to the Lord’s name. How did Nehemiah resist this scheme of intrigue?

B. Nehemiah resisted Satan’s intrigues by standing firm in his priorities.

“I am doing a great work and I cannot come down.” He wasn’t being arrogant. It was just that he knew that what God had given him to do was important for the Lord’s sake and for His people’s sake. And it was not quite finished. Walls without gates were as effective as no walls at all. His priority was to finish the wall. He didn’t allow an unnecessary meeting with the enemy to distract him from that one aim.

As believers, our chief priority is to glorify God by knowing Jesus Christ and by being conformed to His character beginning at the heart level. Anything that pulls you away from that priority, even if it is a ministry, is a ploy of the devil. Beyond that, we have other priorities in accordance with our gifts. As a pastor-teacher, I must devote myself to prayer and the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:4; 2 Tim. 4:1-4). To get distracted with other things, even good things, would be to yield to the enemy’s schemes.


After four frustrated attempts to lure Nehemiah into an ambush, the enemy shifted tactics. He sent an open letter to Nehemiah that contained a rumor accusing him of plotting to rebel and become the king. The word was that he had hired prophets to proclaim in Jerusalem that he was the new king. The letter also contained a not-so-veiled threat that if he didn’t want these nasty
rumors to get back to King Artaxerxes, he needed to agree to a meeting (6:5-7). This shows us that ...

A. Satan spreads slanderous false rumors against godly leaders.

Normally letters between officials were sealed and private. Sanballat knew that the servant who delivered this letter would read it, and so would countless other people along the way. The nice thing about a rumor is, you only have to launch it with one gossip, and it will spread like a virus from person to person, growing more malicious as it travels. Invariably, such rumors attack the character and the motives of a godly leader. "Did you know what Nehemiah was planning?" "No, but I had wondered why he was working so hard on that wall. It sure makes sense!"

Since I have been at this church, I have heard through the rumor mill that I was leading the church into a cult. The reason I was doing this was that I am psychologically unstable and I need counseling to deal with some deep issues that I may not even be aware of. Also, I've heard that I'm trying to lead the church away from our Baptist roots because I preach that God is sovereign in the matter of our salvation. Never mind that the solid Baptists John Bunyan and Charles Spurgeon, not to mention the old Baptist Confessions of Faith, all uphold God's sovereign grace! Those who spread such falsehoods never asked me what my goals are. They just dropped the germs of rumors, and let the virus spread. How did Nehemiah respond to this scheme of the devil?

B. Nehemiah resisted Satan's innuendoes with the truth and with prayer.

In his Lectures to My Students, Spurgeon has a chapter titled "The Blind Eye and the Deaf Ear" ([Zondervan, pp. 321-335). He is right in saying that in most cases, pastors should let such rumors die a natural death. He said (p. 332),

Falsehoods usually carry their own refutation somewhere about them, and sting themselves to death. Some lies especially have a peculiar smell, which betrays their rottenness to every honest nose.... Your blameless life will be your best defence, and those who have seen it will not allow you to be condemned so readily as your slanderers expect.
But he adds (p. 333),

Yet there are exceptions to this general rule. When distinct, definite, public charges are made against a man he is bound to answer them, and answer them in the clearest and most open manner. To decline all investigation is in such a case practically to plead guilty, and ... the general public ordinarily regard a refusal to reply as a proof of guilt.

Since this open letter was serious a public accusation against Nehemiah, he did not remain silent. First, he sent a message back to Sanballat stating the truth and firmly denying the charges: “Such things as you are saying have not been done, but you are inventing them in your own mind” (6:8). Then, he shot up another of his sentence prayers, “But now, O God, strengthen my hands.” (The translators have supplied the words “O God” to reflect the sense of the Hebrew imperative verb.)

Leaders must pray for God’s wisdom as to whether to remain silent or to reply to false accusations. But however we respond, prayer and keeping on with the work that God has given us to do are always right.

The enemy checked Nehemiah with his schemes of intrigue and innuendo. Nehemiah resisted by standing firm in his priorities and with forthright truth and prayer. But Satan didn’t give up.


A. Satan uses religious people to scare us into wrong behavior that would ruin our reputation.

Here the enemy combines deception with intimidation and fear. A prophet named Shemaiah was confined at home. We do not know if he was ill or if he was doing this as a prophetic drama, as the prophets commonly did. He was not outwardly with the enemy, although Nehemiah would later discern that Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him (6:12). Apparently they had also hired or at least influenced a prophetess named Noadiah and other Jewish prophets to try to frighten Nehemiah (6:14). But Shemaiah called for Nehemiah and then suggested that the two of them meet within the temple and close the doors, adding “for they are coming to kill you, and they are coming to kill you at night” (6:10).
Here was a man claiming to have a word from God that could save Nehemiah’s life! “Hide in the temple while you can, because the enemy is going to kill you some night while you are asleep!” If Nehemiah had followed this counsel, he would not have been a good leader, and even more, he would have sinned. If he had gone into hiding, his example of fear would have spread fear among the workers on the wall. And, not being a priest, Nehemiah would have disobeyed God’s law by going into the temple (Num. 18:7). Non-priests could flee for protection to the horns of the altar in the temple courtyard (1 Kings 1:50; 2:28; Exod. 21:14), but they could not enter the temple itself. If Nehemiah had acted in fear and fled to the temple, his enemies would spread the evil report to ruin his reputation (Neh. 6:13).

Be careful when someone claiming to be a Christian invites you to do something that you know is wrong. He may use scare tactics to get you to go along with whatever it is: “Everyone does this. If you don’t join in, nobody will like you. You won’t get invited to any more parties if you don’t drink and do drugs with everyone else.” It is the enemy, trying to scare you into sinful behavior to ruin your testimony. Don’t yield! How did Nehemiah respond?

B. Nehemiah resisted Satan’s intimidation with fearless obedience and prayer.

“Should a man like me flee? And could one such as I go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in” (6:11). Nehemiah didn’t perceive until this point that God had not sent Shemaiah, but that Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him (6:12). One thing that gave Nehemiah this insight was that he knew God’s Word and that a true prophet would never counsel someone to do something against God’s Word. It is always right to obey God’s Word no matter what the threatened consequences may be. It is always wrong to disobey God’s Word, even if it looks like your disobedience will gain you something good. It is better to lose your life, if it so happens, in the path of obedience to God than to save your life through disobedience.

So Nehemiah refused Shemaiah’s counsel and he then reverted to his common practice of lifting up his situation to God in prayer, asking God to take care of his enemies (6:14). When Satan
sends people to intimidate you to disobedience, respond with fearless obedience and prayer.

The result of Nehemiah’s staying the course is almost anticlimactic: “So the wall was completed ... in fifty-two days” (6:15). So the final section leads off with Nehemiah’s victory, followed by the enemy’s rejoinder:


A. Nehemiah’s persistent resistance gained the victory for the Lord.

When the enemies and surrounding nations saw that the wall was completed, they lost their confidence. They had to admit that this work had been accomplished because of God (6:15). All of the enemies that Sanballat had drawn into his plots against the Jews only widened the circle of God’s glory when the wall was finished. Even though Nehemiah and the workers on the wall had worked hard, not even their enemies attributed their success to their hard work. Rather, they knew that it was from God.

That should be a model for us. We should work as hard as if the success depended on us, but all the while we should lean totally upon the Lord, remembering that unless He builds the house and guards the city, we labor in vain (Ps. 127:1). We want even God’s enemies to glorify Him (1 Pet. 2:12).

Then we read, “So Satan gave up the battle and went home, and Nehemiah and the Jews lived happily ever after.” Not exactly!

B. Satan lost the battle, but he didn’t give up. He infiltrated the ranks.

Tobiah, the governor of the Ammonites, was probably a nominal half-Jew (his name is Jewish, meaning “Yah is good”). Furthermore, he was related by marriage to at least two influential Jews (“nobles,” 6:17), and he had business contracts (“bound by oath,” 6:18) with these men. They were not only in frequent contact by mail, but they often told Nehemiah about Tobiah’s “good deeds,” and they reported to Tobiah things that Nehemiah said in their presence. But Tobiah showed his true colors by writing threatening letters to Nehemiah.
Satan often uses such espionage. He infiltrates the ranks of the church with secret agents that profess to be believers. But their hearts are in the world, and they oppose godly men like Nehemiah who expose their spiritual indifference and sin.

This section gives us three practical lessons:

1. Do not expect perfection in Christian work.

   We can expect God to accomplish significant advances for His kingdom through our labors, even as Nehemiah did by rebuilding the wall. But until Jesus comes back, there are no endings that go, “And they lived happily ever after.” Even after the wall was built, the enemy infiltrated the ranks and stirred up further trouble. We will never see a perfect church in this fallen world, and if we expect such, we will quit in frustration. Trust God to use you to advance His cause, but don’t fall into the trap of perfectionism.

2. We must never put confidence in our work, but only in the God who enables us to work.

   Nehemiah couldn’t kick back and admire the wall because these ongoing problems forced him to keep on fighting the battle and trusting in the Lord. Sometimes we mistakenly think that some program or building project or other accomplishment will solve all our problems at the church. But we no sooner achieve our goal than other problems erupt. The Lord uses these things to keep us looking to Him rather than kicking back and trusting our work.

3. When God’s people compromise with the world, it hinders God’s work.

   Tobiah and his son had intermarried with some of the Jewish nobles. He had convinced them that he was a good guy (6:19), even though he was militantly opposed to Nehemiah’s wall project. Later, during Nehemiah’s absence in returning to Persia, Tobiah managed to get personal quarters in the temple. But when Nehemiah returned, he saw this for what it was, compromise with the world, and personally threw his household goods out of the room (13:4-9)! I hope that each of you ponders often the apostle John’s warning: “Do not love the world, nor the things of the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15).
Conclusion

There is a story of a lady who never spoke ill of anyone. A friend told her, “I believe that you would say something good even about the devil.”

“Well,” she replied, “you certainly do have to admire his persistence.”

She’s right: He is persistent! To finish our course, we must fight the good fight of faith by discerning and resisting his many schemes. When our Lord returns, we will ultimately triumph over this evil terrorist!

Discussion Questions

1. How can a believer grow in discernment so as to avoid Satan’s traps?

2. How can we discern when to respond to false rumors about us versus letting them die out on their own?

3. How can we know which doctrines are worth dividing over and which doctrines should be set aside to preserve unity?

4. Since Satan disguises himself as an angel of light and his servants as servants of righteousness (2 Cor. 11:14-15), how can we be on guard against his servants in the church?

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