

**“In the Crosshairs”—Overcoming attacks on leaders
Neh. 6:1-19**

Intro: In an earlier lesson we learned that whenever and wherever God’s people agree to work together to accomplish good, Satan will also be seeking to oppose it. And we can learn a lot about how Satan seeks to prevent God’s work from being done! In that lesson we looked at three weapons Satan uses against God’s people, namely, doubt, fear, and discouragement.

Now as we come toward the end of our study in chapter six we see that leaders in particular are vulnerable to attack. It makes sense. Satan realizes the influence of leaders upon God’s people; we are not surprised that he singles them out for “special treatment”. If he can stop the leaders of the Lord’s people, he can stop the work of the Lord’s people.

If you as a leader have felt at times you were wearing a “bull’s eye”, don’t be surprised, Nehemiah did too! This lesson is intended to help us all understand the ways Satan may attack leaders, how they should respond, and how we may protect them!

Nehemiah 6:1-19

Satan used a number of tactics against Nehemiah to bring God’s work to a halt.

Attempted to inflict personal harm

The enemies of Israel sought to lure Nehemiah from Jerusalem with the intention of harming him. They tried it repeatedly. Nehemiah responded to their plan by refusing to leave the work of God.

Used intimidation and threats

Sanballat appears with an open letter in hand full of false charges against Nehemiah. They included:

That Nehemiah was leading an effort to rebuild the wall in order to rebel against Artaxerxes

That Nehemiah intended to be exalted to king over the people

The purpose of the charges was to intimidate and threaten Nehemiah into “consulting” with the enemy. Cf. v. 9

And notice that all these criticisms came out of the rumor mill! I.e. the source is never given. “It is said...”

Beware of any report that begins, “People are saying...” “I’ve heard or I’ve been told...” “A lot of people think....”

Unfair criticism is a very discouraging thing. It leaves you feeling weak and powerless.

Nehemiah responded properly.

He answered the charges by denying the truth of the charges made against him and revealing that they originated with the enemy and not with him. He saw in them what they really were, an attempt to stop God's work.

He prayed to God for strength to keep going!

Discredited before loyal followers

A man posing as a prophet called Nehemiah to his home (perhaps intimating that the information was too secret to be revealed by anyone else and perhaps to convince Nehemiah that he had his welfare at heart). When Nehemiah arrived he pretended to give a "revelation" to the effect that Nehemiah's life was in danger. He urged Nehemiah to join him in fleeing to the temple where there would be safety. (The Jews had a special abhorrence of bloodshed in the temple precincts since it defiled the temple and could even be considered a human sacrifice).

In actuality Shemaiah was a "hired gun" for the opposition and was trying to get Nehemiah to demonstrate cowardice and violate the Law by going into the temple. (Nehemiah was not a Levite).

The purpose of the plot was to use this act of indiscretion as a weapon to discredit him in front of the people.

It appears that there were a number of such endeavors of various kinds (v. 14).

Again Nehemiah responded the proper way.

He committed no obvious breach of the Law.

He relied upon God to judge the men who were attempting to undermine him.

Eroded security through friendships of brethren with the enemy

Perhaps the final remarks of Nehemiah reveal one of the most difficult and challenging attacks. Tobiah, the outsider and enemy of Israel, had married into one of the prominent Jewish families. By so doing, he had created an alliance with God's people. In addition, he had given his daughter in marriage to another Jewish man. He used the natural covenants of friendship and family loyalty to do a number on Nehemiah.

Letters were constantly passing between the nobles of Israel and Tobiah the enemy.

They constantly reported about what a good man Tobiah was. Apparently they were willing to overlook Tobiah's obvious flaws for the sake of their relationship with him; and that while they would not tolerate mistakes from Nehemiah. Imagine how discouraging the double standard must have been to Nehemiah!

Shared things Nehemiah had said to those who wanted to hurt him.

Such activities would have a powerful eroding effect on Nehemiah's own sense of security. Again, Nehemiah did the right thing. Even though it must have been painful to see and experience all these things, he made no efforts to hurt anyone. He did not lose his cool.

Some important applications for God's leaders and followers today

Some lessons about the cause of God

One of the essential features of a growing church is a strong bond between leaders and their people. People need to believe in their leader (in his commitment to them, his love for them, his common support of their values, his vision for the future of the church). When people lose faith in their leaders, then the church suffers greatly and the work of the Lord comes to a halt. This is why elders, deacons, preachers, and anyone else in leadership positions should demonstrate commitment to people and be protected from misuse.

Satan often strikes right before our greatest victories and accomplishments. The rebuilding of the wall was almost complete; but think of how the story would have been marred if Nehemiah had been intimidated into quitting at the last minute.

Important lessons to those who lead

Leaders must be prepared to be attacked in all the ways mentioned above: by character assassination, by intimidation, by threats of physical harm. But it is important that they learn not to return evil for evil or resort to the tactics used against them. Leaders should always conduct themselves with integrity so that the opponent can say nothing bad about them. Nehemiah didn't resort to "mud slinging" when others were smearing him. He did not resort to the political games and the dishonorable tactics of his opponents, even though he could have probably used them to his advantage. He defended his integrity, stated his purposes, and trusted in God to give him victory.

Important lessons for followers

Followers need to remember that leaders are people too who can be hurt by unfair criticism or bad treatment. Giving someone a position of leadership or paying someone to serve does not come with the right to misuse them.

Followers should realize how important it is to support good leaders and not be manipulated by those who would injure them. Stay out of the rumor mill. It only takes a few carefully chosen criticisms to completely undermine and destroy a person of influence in the church. We should be careful to appreciate and honor those who lead us rather than criticize and withhold support.

Conclusion: I've been preaching for almost thirty years. I've worked with leaders and in some way had to be one and so I can speak out of experience when I tell you what a challenge it is to stand where I stand every Sunday and know that no matter what you say somebody won't like it, no matter what you do, somebody won't approve it. No matter how honorable your motives, someone will question them.

To be honest, there's been many a time when I picked up the Sunday paper on Monday morning and turned to the classifieds, to the jobs section and thought, maybe God doesn't want me to be a preacher. Maybe I can get this target off my back.

But then, if I did, there's so many things I would miss. I'd miss the sheer joy of discovery I experience virtually every day as I study the word of God to prepare to teach someone else. I'd miss that glint in a person's eye when I helped him see something about the Bible he'd never seen, I'd miss the joy of watching someone do something they never did before for the Lord, I'd miss the approving words of people who come out Sunday by Sunday and say, "Thanks for the lesson. That helped me!" I'd miss the satisfaction that maybe someone will be in heaven because I could do this work of teaching people the gospel." And so here I am, still trying to be a gospel preacher!

And, I'm saying this, not to garner sympathy nor to be self-promoting; but to encourage some of you who undoubtedly have similar feelings from time to time, when you tried to be a leader, when you've done your best, and somehow it just didn't measure up for everybody. Think about Nehemiah! Think about his faith, his courage, his love of people.