

Tusculum Hills Baptist Church
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DISTRACTIONS, DANGER, AND DECEPTION – OH MY!

Nehemiah 6

July 23, 2023

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Today's sermon has four points:

- Distraction is a problem.
- Lies are dangerous.
- Deception is of the devil.
- God is our help.

Let's recap where we are in the story of Nehemiah. The longer the series goes the longer the summary becomes, so I have to summarize the summary.

- The book of Nehemiah is an autobiography of a Jewish man who was born outside of Jerusalem and was compelled by God to move to Jerusalem and help rebuild the walls of the city.
- The Jewish people had lived in exile but had returned to Jerusalem some 100 years prior but had not rebuilt the walls. They had become used to the rubble.
- Nehemiah worked for a non-Jewish king who gave him permission to go to Jerusalem and lead the effort of rebuilding the wall. The king sent supplies and a security detail.
- Nehemiah inspected the fallen walls and inspired the people to rebuild them.
- A man named Sanballat and other area leaders ridiculed and plotted against Nehemiah and the builders, but Nehemiah and the people made a plan for their defense and continued to work.
- As the labor continued the people spoke up because they were hungry. Nehemiah realized there were unlawful business dealings going on and he corrected them.

1-DISTRACTION IS A PROBLEM

SCRIPTURE: Nehemiah 6:1-4

When word came to Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall and not a gap was left in it—though up to that time I had not set the doors in the gates—² Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message: “Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono.” But they were scheming to harm me;³ so I sent messengers to them with this reply: “I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?”⁴ Four times they sent me the same message, and each time I gave them the same answer.

EXPLANATION: The enemies were persistent and creative. When intimidation and threats of attack did not stop the progress on the wall, they decided to try a new tactic. They called for a meeting in an area mid-way between Samaria and Jerusalem. The implication here is that they were going to propose a truce or a compromise. However, Nehemiah saw through their schemes. He knew that their true intentions were not honorable. They were not interested in the work. They were not concerned about the welfare of God’s people. This was just another effort to distract Nehemiah from what God had called him to do.

ILLUSTRATION: We understand the word distract. When we are distracted, we are prevented from giving our full attention to something. Interestingly enough, in the Bible, the word distract is only used one time. It appears in Luke 10:40. Two sisters were privileged to have Jesus visit their home. Mary sat at the feet of Jesus, worshipping and listening to his teaching. Martha busied herself with dinner preparations. The Bible tells us, *“But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him (Jesus) and asked, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!”*

The Greek word translated *distract* is perispaó (per-ee-SPAH-o). When you look at the spelling, it’s hard not to see the similarity with our word *perspiration*. The original word actually means “to draw away from.” Just as fluid is drawn out of our bodies when we sweat, we are drawn away from something when we are distracted. Martha was drawn away from Jesus.

In fact, in that story in Luke, Jesus responds to Martha's complaint, "*Martha, Martha,*" the Lord answered, "*you are worried and upset about many things,⁴² but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.*"

ILLUSTRATION: At a church I served, there was a man who was often not happy about numerous things. He'd send long emails with his list of complaints and request meetings with staff members to go over the things he was not happy with. I guess he thought he found a listening ear with me, because he came to me several times. I found the meetings with him unpleasant and non-productive. I asked the leadership if staff had to meet with everyone who requested a meeting and reply to every email. Surprisingly, they said no. The next time the man sent me an email requesting a meeting, I said I would only meet if there were new things to talk about, that I did not want to rehash what we had already talked about. He became angry and sent another email, to which I did not respond. From then on, when I saw him, he would turn his head in another direction. That was fine with me. He was just a distraction.

APPLICATION: Something that looks like a good thing—like responding to a meeting with one's enemies or in the story of Mary and Martha, cooking dinner for the Lord and his followers—can actually be a distraction from the best thing.

- What about you?
- What has God called you to do?
- How easily are you distracted?

Each of us may have different talents and different jobs, but there are a few callings that God has issued to every believer.

- Every Christian is called to be a part of a body of believers. (Hebrews 10:25)
- Every Christian is called to pray. (1 Thessalonians 5:17)
- Every Christian is called to praise and worship God. (Psalm 150:6)
- Every Christian is called to tell the world about Jesus. (Matthew 28:19-20)
- Every Christian is called to live for Christ. (Romans 12:1)

These are the basic callings of a Christian, yet how often are we distracted from these best things?

- How easily are we distracted from attending church services?
- How easily are we distracted from praying?
- How distracted are we during Bible Study Group time or during the worship service? And make sure you are not a distraction to others. Occasionally I might have to tell someone something during the song service, but not often. Don't interrupt people while they are singing or listening to the message.
- In this list of things we get distracted from, how many things keep us from pursuing a Godlier lifestyle?

SCRIPTURE: Proverbs 4:25-27 says, *“Let your eyes look straight ahead; fix your gaze directly before you. Give careful thought to the paths for your feet and be steadfast in all your ways. Do not turn to the right or the left; keep your foot from evil.”*

Nehemiah recognized the importance of staying focused but for most of us:

- Distraction is a problem.

2-LIES ARE DANGEROUS

SCRIPTURE: Nehemiah 6:5-9

Then, the fifth time, Sanballat sent his aide to me with the same message, and in his hand was an unsealed letter⁶ in which was written: “It is reported among the nations—and Geshem says it is true—that you and the Jews are plotting to revolt, and therefore you are building the wall. Moreover, according to these reports you are about to become their king⁷ and have even appointed prophets to make this proclamation about you in Jerusalem: ‘There is a king in Judah!’ Now this report will get back to the king; so come, let us meet together.”⁸ I sent him this reply: “Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head.”⁹ They were all trying to frighten us, thinking, “Their hands will get too weak for the work, and it will not be completed.” But I prayed, “Now strengthen my hands.”

EXPLANATION: You or I would likely not send any letter—let alone an important official document—in an unsealed envelope. In the same way, a private letter between two ancient government officials would have been rolled up and sealed with wax. The fact that Sanballat sent this document in this fashion is an

indication of his disrespect and motive. He wanted the letter to be seen and read. He wanted other people to talk about his accusations. Make no mistake, his intent was very evil. If even a hint of sedition reached King Artaxerxes, Nehemiah would have not only lost his position but most likely his life.

While Nehemiah chose to ignore many of the plots and schemes of his enemies, this one called for a swift reply. He denied the accusation, but he did not try to defend himself. He did not waste the ink. Nehemiah knew that Sanballat and the other enemies were not interested in the truth. Nehemiah's enemies knew the danger of their false words. They used their lies as weapons in their arsenal against Nehemiah. He could not control what Sanballat said, but he had a personal relationship with the Father of Truth. Immediately following Nehemiah's reply, he prayed for strength.

APPLICATION: We are living in a world of lies. In fact, lies are so prevalent in our society that it's hard to know who is telling the truth. According to one article, several studies state that people lie almost twice a day. Another report found that more than 50% of people cannot go more than ten minutes without lying. The Bible calls satan the father of lies (John 8:44).

Yet, if those statistics are true, then it makes you wonder if Christians are lying as often as non-believers. Proverbs 12:22 says, *“The Lord detests lying lips, but he delights in people who are trustworthy.”* How truthful are you? Do you take your words seriously? Matthew 12:36 says, *“But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken.”*

- Distraction is a problem.
- Lies are dangerous.

3-DECEPTION IS OF THE DEVIL

SCRIPTURE: Nehemiah 6:10-13

One day I went to the house of Shemaiah son of Delaiah, the son of Mehetabel, who was shut in at his home. He said, “Let us meet in the house of God, inside the temple, and let us close the temple doors, because men are coming to kill you—by night they are coming to kill you.”¹¹ But I said, “Should a man like me run away? Or should someone like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go!”¹² I realized that God had not sent him, but that he had prophesied against me because

Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. ¹³ He had been hired to intimidate me so that I would commit a sin by doing this, and then they would give me a bad name to discredit me.

EXPLANATION: Upon first glance, you may wonder what is going on in this passage. Shemaiah does not seem to be an enemy of Nehemiah. If he was, why the visit? In fact, it seems to us that Shemaiah is concerned about Nehemiah's physical welfare. He is, after all, making a good proposition. He is telling Nehemiah how he can stay safe.

Shemaiah was indeed a prominent Jew. However, he and other Jewish leaders, including prophets and priests, had become entangled with the enemies. For example, Sanballat's daughter married the chief priest's grandson. Tobiah and his son were both married to Jewish women. Because of the personal family connections and professional jealousies, Nehemiah was facing problems within the wall as well as outside the walls. Shemaiah was a wolf in sheep's clothing. Thankfully, Nehemiah also saw through this deception.

If Nehemiah had chosen to follow Shemaiah's suggestion, his actions would have weakened his reputation and the people's resolve. What people, in the face of danger, want to stand firm or support a leader who runs and hides? In addition, Nehemiah recognized Shemaiah's lies because he knew God's word. Nehemiah was a layman, not a priest; therefore, (according to Numbers 18:7), he could not go into the inner part of the temple.

In a world of deceit, how do we know who to trust? We must know scripture and consider carefully what God has to say about the matter.

- Distraction is a problem.
- Lies are dangerous.
- Deception is of the devil.

4-GOD IS OUR HELP

SCRIPTURE: Nehemiah 6:14-16

Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, my God, because of what they have done; remember also the prophet Noadiah and how she and the rest of the prophets have

been trying to intimidate me. ¹⁵ *So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days.* ¹⁶ *When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God.*

EXPLANATION: Despite everything that the enemies did, the wall was completed in record time. The month of Elul corresponds to our months of August/September. If you remember, Nehemiah first heard the news about the wall in November/December of the previous year. He'd spent a few months praying, a few months preparing and traveling, and a few months building, and, in less than a year, the wall was built. Nehemiah knew where the credit was due. It was only with the Lord's help that such a monumental task could have been accomplished.

Just as he had prayed for God to remember and strengthen him, Nehemiah prayed that God would remember his enemies for all that they had done to try and thwart God's work.

APPLICATION: Nehemiah's story offers several good reminders.

- Distraction is a problem. As Christians, the devil cannot destroy us, but he will certainly try to distract us from God's work.
- Lies are dangerous, but if we maintain a life of character, God will take care of our reputation.
- Deception is of the devil. Human allegiances should never outweigh our loyalty to Christ, and if we want to know the truth of a matter, we have to know God's word.
- God is our help. Psalm 46:1 says, "*God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.*" If he has called us to a task, he will help us see it to completion.

INVITATION: Distraction, Danger, and Deception—Oh My! The devil will do whatever he can to keep the people of God from living what they believe and telling others about him. Are you allowing him to succeed? The altar is open if you want to come forward and pray. I am here if you want to know how to have victory over sin and Satan through our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Some of you have been distracted by the ways of the world. You've been lied to, and you believed the lies. You've been deceived and fallen into others' traps. It's time to own up to all of us and seek the truth. Jesus said, *“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”*

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