



Scotts Hill Baptist Church

TRANSFORMED LIVES • GOING DEEPER • NEHEMIAH 6:1-16 •

MAIN POINT

God gives us strength as we seek to live out the vision He has given us.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

Share about a time when you gave up on task or project due to opposition from others.

On the other hand, have you ever seen a task through in the face of opposition? What made the essential difference in your ability to withstand the opposition you faced?

We often find it easy to get excited about a new project—a diet, an exercise program, a savings plan, a home improvement project, a new ministry, or the like. But it doesn't take long for the initial enthusiasm to wear off. The discipline and work become tiring. When it comes to tasks God gives us to complete, we often face spiritual setbacks and attacks as well. Nehemiah's example challenges us to hang in there and see God's vision through.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

Nehemiah's building project was near completion, and the opposition was desperate. Despite several attempts to distract Nehemiah and draw his attention and time away from the task at hand, all their efforts had failed.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ NEHEMIAH 6:1-9.

What distractions did Nehemiah face as he tried to lead his people?

Since a surprise attack no longer was possible, Sanballat and Tobiah attempted another strategy. If they could lure Nehemiah away from the protection of the Jews, they might be able to kill him. Without his leadership the Jews might be frustrated and unable to complete the wall. So these enemies made efforts to lure him into danger with a distracting and deceptive offer of peace talks.

Because everything else had failed, the opposition resorted to attacking Nehemiah's personal character. What specific character attacks did they make, and what doubts did they try to fuel about him?

Why is character attack such a useful approach, especially when trying to thwart someone's ministry? How do you think you would have felt if you were Nehemiah?

Sanballat then added a new twist to his evil strategy. He sent Nehemiah an open letter—which he intended to become public—accusing Nehemiah of using the rebuilding of the wall to manipulate his way into power to form a rebellion. Sanballat intended the rumors to frighten both Nehemiah and the other people who heard them. But Nehemiah was unfazed—he knew these rumors had no basis in fact.

What distractions or interruptions have you faced as you attempt to serve the Lord? What practical strategies can you use to withstand those distractions or interruptions? How did Nehemiah seek to avoid the distractions that were sent his way?

Nehemiah began his avoidance actions by sending individuals with a message for his detractors; Nehemiah then sent one of his detractors a written message. Finally, Nehemiah summoned his courage and resolve by praying.

Read Nehemiah's prayer in verse 9 again. It is remarkable that in the face of such personal attacks, Nehemiah prayed for God's strength to continue. What does this show about Nehemiah's faith and focus?

From the beginning, Nehemiah had put the matter of rebuilding Jerusalem's wall in God's hands (see 1:5-11). He had prayed silently when the king asked him what he wanted to do about Jerusalem (2:4). He had told his opponents his God would give him success (2:20). Now again at this critical moment as the work neared completion, Nehemiah asked God to strengthen him once more.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ NEHEMIAH 6:10-14.

What intimidation did Nehemiah face as he neared completion of the rebuilding project? What are some similar ways we might face intimidation as we seek to do God's work?

How did Nehemiah withstand this intimidation and also determine that this intimidation had no element of truth? Read Numbers 18:7; Deuteronomy 18:20; and Isaiah 8:19-20 for insight.

Nehemiah realized that God had not sent Shemaiah precisely because of the prophecy he spoke. Nehemiah understood that for him to enter the temple would have brought upon him God's displeasure (see Num. 18:7), and he preferred to take his chances with human threats. God would not contradict Himself through one of His prophets (see Deut. 13:1-3). Nehemiah thus knew Shemaiah had spoken falsely in God's name.

What is the lesson for us from this opposition and Nehemiah's response?

What practical strategies can you use to withstand intimidation? How can you determine if opponents' statements have any truth in them?

Read 2 Timothy 2:24-26. What do these verses teach us about dealing with opposition we may face when we are doing God's work?

| HAVE A FINAL VOLUNTEER READ NEHEMIAH 6:15-16.

What lay in ruins for Israel had been rebuilt in 52 days. How was this possible?

What was the response of Israel's enemies to the completed wall? When have you seen a great accomplishment lead others to recognize God and His power?

The united efforts of a believing people yielded huge dividends as God blessed the work on Jerusalem's wall, which was completed in 52 days. Enemies of God's people heard the news of the wall's completion. As a result, all the surrounding nations were intimidated. God's people had determined that the best answer to their opposition was to keep working and fulfill God's will. As they did so, neighboring nations saw God's power in them. When God's people accomplish God's work in God's strength, God gets the glory.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

In what ways have you been discouraged in your work for the Lord? What encouragement did you receive from Nehemiah's examples in this lesson?

Of the three specific attacks Nehemiah faced—temptation, intimidation, and speculation—which most often traps you, and why do you think that is such an issue for you?

What needs to change in your prayer life to follow Nehemiah's example?

What practical steps can you take to embrace the vision of Going Deeper as a disciple this year?

PRAYER

As you close in prayer, ask God to strengthen your hearts and hands for your personal ministry and your part in the ministries of our church. Pray that like Nehemiah, you would be people who deal with the oppositions you face through prayer and confidence in God's plans for you.

COMMENTARY

| NEHEMIAH 6:1-16

6:1. Nehemiah was not taking credit here for rebuilding the wall singlehandedly. He was only speaking from the viewpoint of the enemies who understood that stopping the work would mean stopping Nehemiah. In any great work of God the leaders are strategic; the enemy, whether human or satanic, will try to cause the leader to fall, lose credibility, or disappear altogether. Leadership always involves stress. Here Nehemiah's personal danger added to his stress, but he was able to confront it, trusting the Lord and continuing to work toward the God-given goal.

6:2. Nehemiah's enemies first attempted to lure him outside the city with a pretense of peacemaking. "Ono" was about seven miles southeast of Joppa. It may have been in neutral territory between Judah and Samaria, although the references to Jews living in Ono (see Ezra 2:33; Neh. 11:35) make it more likely that it was in the extreme northwestern

part of Judah. It was evidently not difficult for Nehemiah to determine from past experience that “they were scheming to harm” him.

6:3-4. A more foolish leader bloated with his own importance might have convinced himself that this was an important opportunity to take time out from construction for diplomacy. Nehemiah’s answer was polite but firm and somewhat ironic, since leaving the work was the very object of their overtures. These men repeated their invitation “four times,” which shows their desperation to halt the work. Repeated temptation can also weaken one’s resistance. Nehemiah stood firm and was careful not to let the opposition divert him from his main purpose.

6:5. On their next attempt, they tried a different motivation to get Nehemiah to respond. An open letter can be a vicious way to attack a leader. If Sanballat had been interested in reconciliation, he could have gone to Jerusalem. But now he and Geshem dropped their pretense of friendliness and tried to spread rumors that would damage the work. This strategy was very subtle; on the one hand, it could have diverted Nehemiah from his purpose. On the other hand, the rumors, if left unchecked, could affect public support and bring down the wrath of the Persian king on the Jewish community. After the events of Ezra 4, when similar reports resulted in a Persian decree to stop the work, this seemed to be an excellent plan.

6:6-7. The reported rumors were serious accusations. Jerusalem had a history of rebelling against controlling empires. A strong wall around Jerusalem would have made rebellion more viable. No doubt some of the Jews were remembering the prophecies of restoration of the Davidic kingship; some commentators think Nehemiah was a descendant of David, although there is no biblical evidence that he was.

6:8. Slander and gossip usually play on some kernel of truth or some weak point of the leader. How should the leader react? It is legitimate to defend oneself against inaccurate slander, but it is often better to ignore it if possible. Knowing the accusations to be lies, Nehemiah was able simply to deny them and continue the work.

6:9. Nehemiah recognized the psychological warfare of the enemies. The same verb translated “frighten” in v. 9 is repeated again in vv. 13,14,19, where it is translated “intimidate” (lit., “to make afraid”). The different forms of opposition in this chapter were all intended to instill fear in Nehemiah and his helpers so they would not continue the work. The words “but I prayed” are not in the Hebrew text but are added to identify the clause “now strengthen my hands” as a prayer to God.

6:10. Nehemiah's enemies would not give up but kept trying different strategies. Some people within the Jewish community were not in favor of the building project; so Sanballat and Tobiah tried to use them against Nehemiah's leadership (see v. 14). Nehemiah accepted Shemaiah's invitation to see him, thinking he was a true prophet. But Shemaiah had sold out to the opposition. He used his influence to undermine Nehemiah. He may have thought he was doing the right thing, but he simply joined the ranks of the betrayers in the Scriptures and in the world.

If Shemaiah's father, Delaiah, is the same one mentioned in 1 Chronicles 24:18, then Shemaiah was a priest and had special access into the temple. Nehemiah could not enter legitimately. Many years before, Uzziah went into the temple and was stricken with leprosy.

6:11-12. Nehemiah "realized that God had not sent" Shemaiah. He was able to discern that Shemaiah was a fraud. Shemaiah's proposal constituted a subtle temptation. Nehemiah was sensitive to do God's will. He did not want to be closed to what could have been God's message through a prophet. How then could he discern whether or not the message was from God (and how can we)? His two questions in v. 11 indicate the answer: (1) "Should a man like me run away?" This show of fear, and even cowardice, would be a lack of trust in God and would undermine the confidence of the people in his leadership. (2) "Should one like me go into the temple to save his life?" It was not lawful for him to enter the temple. According to Deuteronomy 18:20 and Isa. 8:19-20, if a word that claims to be a prophecy from God is in contradiction with what God has already revealed, we should be suspicious of it.

6:13-14. The strategy to "discredit" the leader is a subtle one and is common today. Against such attacks we can again learn from Nehemiah's decision to do what was right and leave the outcome to God. Thus he again prayed that God "remember Tobiah and Sanballat ... the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets" who were opposed to his leadership and opposed God's work. Vengeance was left to God (see Deut. 32:35; Ps. 94:1; Rom. 12:19).

6:15. What a note of victory! The best answer to opposition is to keep working and fulfill God's will; thus others will see God's power. "The twenty-fifth of Elul" has been determined to correspond with October 2, 445 B.C., although the date is disputed. Elul was the sixth month starting with Nisan as the first (2:1); so all the events of chaps. 2-6 fit into these six months. "In fifty-two days" seems very short, but there is no good reason to doubt it. It

shows what can be accomplished when the community works together under good leadership.

6:16. Why do people oppose God's work? If they admit that it is God working, that admission implies that they recognize his power (see Acts 5:34-39). If they can continue to convince themselves that the gospel really is not true or that this work is not God's work, then they can remain comfortable in their unbelief or indifference. But this self-confidence receives a blow when they understand that God has really been working in and through His people.

Judah's enemies tried to make Nehemiah and the Jews afraid; but in the end they were the ones who feared (see Deut 2:25; 1 Chr 14:17; Ps 126:2; Mal 1:11, 14) because they realized God had done something astonishing in this community. The phrase "and lost their self-confidence" is literally "and they fell very much in their eyes," an unfamiliar idiom but one suggesting their pride had suddenly vanished (see Prov 16:18-19; 29:23). Though the enemies increased because of Sanballat, the result was that more people were impressed with God's power (4:1,7).