

Unwavering Resolve

The Enemy's Tactics

Nehemiah 6

June 21, 2026

Introduction

(Title Slide) A couple of years ago, if you went to our church's website and clicked on the page that introduces you to the staff, underneath each picture of a staff member would have been an email icon that, when clicked, would have revealed to you what our email addresses were. That is no longer an option, in large part because someone used my email address and began reaching out to other staff members ... right down to the interns ... asking them to run to Wal-Mart, buy a bunch of visa gift cards "for the staff as a surprise", open them and take pictures of them, and send them "to me" so I can later share them with the team. And sadly, one of our team members succumbed to the effort (don't worry, it all worked out in the end).

This tactic of deliberately targeting one person and the few people that surround him is called SPEAR PHISHING. Most people have received a phishing email. The grammar is wrong, the address looks suspicious, and it asks you to click something. These work on a surprising number of people. But spear phishing is obviously different. Instead of sending the same generic email to a million people, a spear phishing attack researches a specific individual. It uses their name, mimics a trusted colleague, references real details from their life, and targets their specific vulnerability.

That is exactly the shift that happens in Nehemiah 6. By the time we reach this chapter, the wall is nearly finished. Verse 1 tells us the gaps have been filled in, though the doors have not yet been hung. Sanballat and his allies know it. Everything they have tried has failed. The mockery in chapter 4 did not stop the building. The threats did not stop it. The internal conflict in chapter 5 did not stop it. So they changed the approach entirely. What follows is a targeted campaign against the person. There are four attempts, and for time's sake, I'm going to focus on two of them.

Body

Distract

The first spear phishing attempt is one of **distraction**. Look at vv. 1-2a. **(Slide)**

When Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab, and the rest of our enemies heard that I had rebuilt the wall and that no gap was left in it— though at that time I had not installed the

doors in the city gates—Sanballat and Geshem sent me a message: “Come, let’s meet together in the villages of the Ono Valley.”

At first glance, this request seems perfectly reasonable. For all of their dirty tactics, Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem were legitimate regional authorities that Nehemiah would need to govern alongside long after the wall was finished. So a governor who refuses to meet with his regional counterparts four times is doing something professionally strange, something that the years Nehemiah spent in the Persian court would have trained him to avoid.

Add to that the timing. The wall is nearly done. The gaps are filled. The doors just need to be hung. The hardest work is behind them. One brief diplomatic trip to the plain of Ono (a neutral place) is not going to stop anything at this point. And if the meeting produces a peace agreement, or even just a reduction in regional hostility, the wall and the community it protects will be better for it.

Also, wouldn’t it make you feel pretty good about yourself to get an invitation from a dignitary, even one that you didn’t like and that didn’t like you? Even our enemies can use our insecurities to help us feel better about ourselves.

Quite honestly, every reasonable instinct in Nehemiah, every habit formed by years of careful, patient work in a foreign court, pulled him toward the plain of Ono and away from the work.

But he didn’t go. Look at vv. 2b-4.

They were planning to harm me. So I sent messengers to them, saying, “I am doing important work and cannot come down. Why should the work cease while I leave it and go down to you?” Four times they sent me the same proposal, and I gave them the same reply.

Now, you might read the end of v. 2 there and conclude that Nehemiah was referencing physical harm, but the Hebrew word is used throughout the Old Testament to reference all kinds of “harm” – physical included. But Nehemiah’s response in v. 3 helps us interpret the meaning here. He saw their overture as a distraction, and getting Nehemiah off the wall at such a crucial time would have done great harm to him as a leader and to the people who were following him.

Illustration – Eastern Airlines

(Slide) On December 29, 1972, Eastern Air Lines Flight 401 approached Miami on a clear night with 176 people on board. As the crew began their descent, a small light in the cockpit failed to illuminate, the indicator that confirmed the nose landing gear had locked into position. The pilots did not ignore it. They did exactly what their training required. They pulled the plane into a holding pattern over the Everglades and turned their full attention to the indicator light. The captain, the first officer, and the flight engineer all worked the problem together. It was legitimate work. It was necessary work. It was precisely what the situation called for.

What none of them noticed was that the autopilot had been accidentally disengaged. While the crew gave their complete attention to a burned-out light bulb, the plane descended slowly and without drama into the Florida swamp. One hundred and one people died.¹ The aircraft was not brought down by negligence or recklessness. It was brought down by the crew doing their jobs, at the wrong moment, with the wrong priority. The most dangerous distraction is rarely the one that looks like a distraction. It is the one that looks like work. So many good things are the enemy of right things. *(Title Slide)*

Discredit

Four refusals do not end the attack. They teach Sanballat something. Nehemiah has a king he answers to in Persia, a reputation that matters, and a legitimate concern about what reports might reach Artaxerxes. The next attempt exploits all three.

The second spear phishing attempt is one of *discredit*. Look at vv. 5-7. *(Slide)*

Sanballat sent his aide to me with the same message a fifth time, with an open letter in his hand. In it was written: "It is reported among the nations—and Geshem confirms it—that you and the Jews are planning to rebel."

This is why you are building the wall. According to these reports, you are to become their king and have even appointed prophets in Jerusalem to proclaim on your behalf, 'There is a king in Judah.' These reports will reach the king. So come, let's confer together."

Before you read Nehemiah's response, notice two things about the letter. First, it is open. In the ancient world, a sealed letter was private correspondence. An unsealed letter was designed to be read by every person who carried it. So by sending an unsealed letter, Sanballat was making a public accusation, and by the time Nehemiah opened it, everyone who touched it along the road from Samaria to Jerusalem had already read it. The damage was done before Nehemiah saw the first line.

Second, notice how Sanballat phrases it. He does not say "I am accusing you." He says it is "reported among the nations" and that "Geshem confirms it." He is distributing the claim while distancing himself from it. And the claim is built from details that are actually true. Nehemiah is building a wall. He is a significant leader in Jerusalem. Prophets are operating in the region. The lie is wrapped in enough truth to be believable to anyone who does not know Nehemiah personally.

Now feel the weight of what Nehemiah is facing. An accusation of plotting rebellion against Persia is not a minor charge. If it reaches Artaxerxes, Nehemiah could be recalled, imprisoned, or executed. If there's smoke, there's fire, right? You don't even have to live in a cancel culture to know that the accusation itself is enough to render a leader impotent.

¹ National Transportation Safety Board, Aircraft Accident Report: Eastern Air Lines, Inc., L-1011, N310EA, Miami, Florida, December 29, 1972 (Washington, DC: NTSB, 1973), 1-18.

Those of us who have ever had something false said about us publicly know the trap. The accusation travels faster than any correction. And the problem with mounting a defense is that the defense keeps the story alive. Every response is fuel. The more carefully you argue your case, the more the audience assumes there must be something worth arguing about. So the pressure to step away from the work and manage the story is enormous, but Nehemiah does not take the bait. Look at vv. 8-9.

I replied to him, "There is no truth to any of this. You are inventing them in your own mind," for they were all trying to intimidate us, thinking, "They will become discouraged by the work, and it will never be finished."

But now, my God, strengthen my hands.

Nehemiah's reply is three sentences. One denial. One diagnosis. One prayer. He does not launch a public defense. He does not write a letter to Artaxerxes preemptively explaining himself. He does not call a meeting with Jerusalem's leaders to shore up their confidence in him. He says Sanballat is inventing the accusation, names the motive, asks God for strength, and goes back to work.

But that doesn't stop them from trying again to discredit Nehemiah. Look at vv. 10-13. ***(Slide)***

I went to the house of Shemaiah son of Delaiah, son of Mehetabel, who was restricted to his home. He said, "Let us meet in the house of God, inside the temple sanctuary, and let us shut the temple doors, for they are coming to kill you. They are coming to kill you tonight."

But I said, "Should a man like me run away? How can someone like me enter the temple and live? I will not go." I realized that God had not sent him, because of the prophecy he spoke against me.

Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. He was hired, so that I would be intimidated, do as he suggested, sin, and get a bad reputation, in order that they could discredit me.

Notice how different this attack is from the first two. Sanballat and Geshem were regional authorities, recognized adversaries with obvious interests. An open letter from Sanballat, however damaging, came from a known opponent. Shemaiah is something else entirely. He is a fellow Israelite, apparently a man with prophetic or priestly standing in the community, and Nehemiah goes to his house, which means Nehemiah sought him out, presumably for counsel. So this is a word from someone who looks like a friend, and the advice he gives sounds like pastoral care. Everything about the encounter is designed to feel trustworthy.

But Shemaiah was anything but trustworthy. Nehemiah recognizes that it was all a set up to ruin his credibility as a leader.

Illustration

(Slide) For nearly twenty years, William Wilberforce brought a bill before the British Parliament to abolish the slave trade, and for nearly twenty years the opposition gave him everything Sanballat gave Nehemiah. He was called a fanatic, a hypocrite, an enemy of British commerce, a man whose sentimentalism disqualified him from serious public life. The slave trade lobby was organized, funded, and relentless. It attacked his character, questioned his motives, and treated his Christian convictions as evidence of instability rather than integrity. Wilberforce did not stop to write a rebuttal against each accusation. He went back to Parliament the following session. He went back to his desk. He went back to the work. The Slave Trade Act passed in 1807. Wilberforce died in 1833, three days after Parliament secured the decisive vote that guaranteed the abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire.² The accusations are forgotten. The work is not. *(Title Slide)*

A man who places his security in his reputation will always be vulnerable to a false accusation, because his adversary can threaten that reputation with a single letter. A man who places his security in God can deny the charge in one sentence and return to work, because what his adversary says about him does not determine what God says about him. Nehemiah is not indifferent to his good name. He is simply free from needing to protect it at the expense of the work.

Conclusion/Application

The question worth sitting with today is not whether you face opposition. You do. The question is what kind is pulling on you right now. Is it a distraction, something legitimate and reasonable that is consuming the attention and energy you owe to the most important work in your life? Or is it a discrediting attack, something false being said about you that is tempting you to abandon the work in order to manage your reputation?

Nehemiah's answer to both is the same: know what you are doing, know who sent you, and do not come down. That answer does not come from willpower or self-confidence. It comes from a relationship with God that produces clarity about who you are and what you are for. When you know what God has called you to, and you know that he is the one who determines your worth, you send back one sentence and return to work.

The men in this room: what are you building, and have you let good things pull you off the wall? Your family is watching. Children learn what it looks like to hold under pressure by watching their father hold. The gift of an undistracted, unintimidated father is something a family carries for a generation.

As a church, we face versions of both attacks. There are legitimate and good things competing for our attention and energy, things that feel like necessary work but are pulling us from the

² Eric Metaxas, *Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 261-274.

essential work of making disciples, of loving one another, of holding out the gospel to our neighbors. And there are seasons when false or uncharitable things are said about us, when our reputation in the community is questioned, and the pressure to step away from the work to manage the story is enormous. If our security rests in our standing in the community, a single letter threatens to undo us. If our security rests in God, we deny the charge, pray for strong hands, and go back to work.

But here is what makes Nehemiah's story more than a model of good leadership. Nehemiah held against distraction and discrediting because he was a good and courageous man. He was not, however, the final answer. Jesus was.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus faced every form of distraction from his mission. "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Come down from your post. Provide for yourself. Use your power for your own benefit." He refused. When the crowd tried to make him king after the feeding of the five thousand, he withdrew. When Pilate offered him a way out, he did not take it. When the crowd beneath the cross called out, "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross," he stayed.

He stayed because coming down would have meant leaving the work unfinished. The work required the cross.

He was also discredited in every way a man can be discredited. He was accused of blasphemy. He was called demon-possessed. False witnesses testified against him at his trial. He was convicted of crimes he did not commit and executed in the most publicly shameful manner the ancient world knew. Every human institution rendered its verdict: guilty, finished, discredited. And then God rendered his verdict.

The resurrection is God's answer to every false accusation ever brought against Jesus. It is God declaring, in the most irreversible way imaginable, that what his adversaries said about him did not determine what God said about him. The tomb is empty. The verdict stands. And because we are united to Christ by faith, his righteousness covers our record. The accusations that threaten to destabilize us, the true ones and the false ones, have already been answered at the cross and the empty tomb. We stand before God not on the basis of what people say about us, or even on the basis of what we have done, but on the basis of what Jesus did when he refused to come down, and what God declared when he raised him from the dead.

That is why Nehemiah's pattern is available to you. Not because you are as strong as Nehemiah. Most of us are not. But because the God who strengthened Nehemiah's hands has given you something Nehemiah did not fully have: the Spirit of the risen Christ dwelling in you. When you pray "my God, strengthen my hands," you are praying to the God who has already defeated every power that would pull you off your post.

Know what you are doing. Know who sent you. Do not come down.