

What keeps you from seeing things through to the end? Is it the busyness and pace of life, fatigue, waning interest, fear? If you were to ask my boys about the things they hear from me regularly, the list would invariably include the phrase “finish strong”. Whether it’s the school semester, a game, a project, chores, or reconciling with others, the phrase is given as encouragement because of the difficulty that often comes with seeing something through to the end, particularly when the finish line is in sight. And the bigger the task, the harder it is.

The challenge of finishing well is not unique to this time and place. It resounds throughout Scripture. The characters of the Bible were constantly confronted with the difficulty of seeing things through to the end. There is no greater example of this than Jesus. Whether it was the constant pull to spend all his time healing people instead of preaching the gospel, the lure to constantly defend himself because of the consistent attacks on his reputation, or even the schemes and deception of the devil to try to get Jesus to relinquish his role as the Messiah by disobeying, Jesus faced tremendous forces aligned to keep him from completing his mission. But he saw it through, the fulfillment of his calling ended with a resounding, “It is finished”.

This morning, I want to answer the question “How can we finish the work God has called us to?” We find ourselves in a unique time in the history of our church. We have gone through a lot of transition, are in year three of living out a new mission and vision and, to some extent, have relaunched the church. Individually, more and more of us are being awakened to our God-given purpose, stirred by divine discontent. **We are on the move and God is taking us somewhere.** How will we ultimately finish, and what might try to get in our way?

We’re going to be in Nehemiah 6 where this faithful man of God, who is on the brink of finishing the wall, will encounter a wave of threats that seek to derail him. Through him we’ll see the threats common to all who aspire to do the work of God, and how you and I can overcome those threats, see the work of Fellowship through to the end, and finish strong.

**Threat #1: Distract to delay.** The more we take our eyes and attention away from the task at hand, the less likely we will be to finish strong.

**[Nehemiah 6:1-4] Now when Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies heard that I had built the wall and that there was no breach left in it (although up to that time I had not set up the doors in the gates),<sup>2</sup> Sanballat and Geshem sent to me, saying, “Come and let us meet together at Hakkephirim in the plain of Ono.” But they intended to do me harm.<sup>3</sup> And I sent messengers to them, saying, “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?”<sup>4</sup> And they sent to me four times in this way, and I answered them in the same manner.**

The work of the wall is almost complete and the villains of this story notice. **The closer you are to finishing, the more fierce the opposition will become.** These guys now change their tactics. So far, we’ve seen them conspire to mock, intimidate, and threaten violence. But now they are going a different route. They are smiling and saying, “let’s have a chat.” They invite Nehemiah to a conference in the Plain of Ono. This is an area northwest of Jerusalem, on the border of Judah and Samaria (Sanballat country), and a one- or two-day journey from home. What looks

like a friendly meeting is anything but. Nehemiah immediately sees it as a set up that will take him off the wall and into harm's way.

What are you doing that gets you noticed? The more of a difference we make, the more we will be on others' radars. And it doesn't mean you have to be building a wall to be making progress. We want everyone at Fellowship to get moving, to be taking that next step that God has for your life. That could be having a crucial conversation with God to get right through repentance or a crucial conversation with someone in your life to get right through apology. It may be diving into God's Word more deeply, being baptized, or attending Repurposed. Maybe you're about to get married and want to do good work to prepare yourselves for that, or you've got some struggles in your life and you need to do some recovery. Or maybe you are fully living into your Divine Discontent, your God-given purpose, and starting to have an impact there. Regardless, if you take that next step, you are making difference, and, like Nehemiah, you will be noticed. And with notice comes distraction.

Distractions can be intended for evil or intended for good. In Nehemiah's case it was intended for evil, and we will encounter those distractions ourselves, but some just arrive in the normal course of life. Meetings, unexpected developments, the tyranny of the urgent, and other noble causes will all try to take our eyes off our work. How does Nehemiah handle it?

As I heard one preacher say, when you are invited to the Plain of Ono, the only good answer is "Oh, no." Nehemiah recognizes the threat to himself and also knows this will take him off the job. His response is straightforward, direct, and clear: **No**. The reason? He is doing a great work for God, and his time is not to be spent on a retreat with these guys. The call of God is more compelling than the call of others. This chapter is really the fruit of all that has come before it. Nehemiah has leaned into God so deeply and intimately that he is unwavering in his clarity of and commitment to what God has called him to do.

I believe every one of us must get better at the spiritual discipline of saying "no". We will only be able to do that if we are clear on our calling and **believe that what God has for us is great**, and greater than anything any other option. Clarity and conviction lead to the confidence and courage to design a life of intentional investment, where we make purposeful commitments by saying "yes" to some things and "no" to others.

I want you to know I'm practicing what I'm preaching. I don't think I've yet encountered any evilly intended distractors in my role, but I have encountered plenty that can get me off track. One of the conversations I'm having with the elders is where I need to be hands on and hands off. Between leading and preaching and worship pastor searching and discipling and being a husband and father, and getting my hair done, I can be pulled in a million different directions and not be very effective at anything. So the question must be asked and answered: What is it that I **MUST** do? Everything else must take a back seat to that. And it's important because distractions don't come knocking just once. **Those who are resistant are persistent**. Nehemiah got asked four times, but he was able to say no and focus on what God had called him to. That's the clarity and confidence Nehemiah had, and that's the clarity and confidence I pray all of us get to.

I also want to submit that some distractions are self-imposed. It's cliché for a preacher to rail against the time we spend on our phones, but it's worthwhile saying it again this morning. These

things keep us not just distracted, but hypnotized. They get in the way of our work, time with our families, between spouses at bedtime, running hard after God and running hard after what God has called us to do. But I want to point out something very practical. My son mocked me for not updating my phone until this week, and he showed me this new feature called Screen Time. It gives you the amount of time you spend on different apps, websites, etc. It also shows you the average number of times you simply pick up your phone. And while I'm going to pretend that this is simply going to help me better monitor my kids' cell phone use, I recognize what an amazing tool it can be to hold us accountable and help us manage the distractions in our life and stay focused on what God has called us to do.

**Threat #2: Discredit to divide.** If distraction doesn't work, an assault on our reputation through rumors and lies might.

**[Nehemiah 6:5-9] <sup>5</sup> In the same way Sanballat for the fifth time sent his servant to me with an open letter in his hand. <sup>6</sup> In it was written, "It is reported among the nations, and Geshem also says it, that you and the Jews intend to rebel; that is why you are building the wall. And according to these reports you wish to become their king. <sup>7</sup> And you have also set up prophets to proclaim concerning you in Jerusalem, 'There is a king in Judah.' And now the king will hear of these reports. So now come and let us take counsel together." <sup>8</sup> Then I sent to him, saying, "No such things as you say have been done, for you are inventing them out of your own mind." <sup>9</sup> For they all wanted to frighten us, thinking, "Their hands will drop from the work, and it will not be done." But now, O God, strengthen my hands.**

Sanballat came to Nehemiah for a fifth time, but this time it's different. You see his servant is carrying an open letter. We could fly past that, but Nehemiah is telling us something. Letters were normally sealed for the sake of privacy. An open letter was intended to be read by everyone, so the contents of the letter likely got around to all the Jews in Jerusalem.

Nehemiah is accused to leading a rebellion with the aim of setting himself up as king. Notice Sanballat's approach: it's known among the nations, a general statement. Ever had anyone say something about you that "everyone is talking about". It's also personalized, because even Geshem is saying it. And then comes the threat: Artaxerxes is going to hear about it. And if Artaxerxes believes a rebellion is going on, he will move to crush it. The goal is to get the Jews resentful of Nehemiah for setting himself up as king and fearful of the wrath of Artaxerxes. **Fear leads to friction and friction leads to fracture.** And when something is broken, it doesn't work anymore. Division in the ranks means a stoppage of work, and you can imagine how quickly the word spread. How would the Jews respond?

In just the last few weeks we have seen the impact an accusation can have. Actor Jussie Smollett claimed he was the victim of a hate crime three weeks ago. And while it looks like his story is falling apart, and I pray the full truth comes out, you saw how quickly it got around (social media is the ultimate "open letter"), how quickly it enflamed tension, fear, and division. That's what Sanballat is hoping for.

If you were accused of wrongdoing, would the way you have lived your life cause others to tend to believe the rumor? **The content of your character determines the stickiness of an**

**accusation.** Now, we've had plenty in the church recently whose character seemed solid and found accusations to be true. But generally, if we are of high character, accusations won't be believed.

I ask that because Nehemiah could have heard these rumors and accusations and started a PR campaign to ensure "all the nations", Geshem himself, his Jewish brethren, and even Artaxerxes knew they weren't true. But that would have taken him off the wall. If our concern for our own reputation is greater than our concern from God's, we'll spend all our time seeking the approval of men instead of doing what God has called us to. It's important for us to understand that we can't control our reputation. People will say what people will say. What we do have control over, though, is our character by how we live our lives.

Nehemiah did not flinch when he heard the accusations. He denied them, accused Sanballat of making them up, and then did something that we've seen time and again. He prayed. And this time, his prayer was a simple but powerful one. **"But now, O God, strengthen my hand."** This man of character, confident in who he was before the Lord and how he had lived in obedience since the day he received the report back in Susa, asked God to give him the strength to simply keep going, to finish strong. And since he was a man of character, this rumor did not take root in the minds of his fellow Jews, and we have no record of it causing Artaxerxes to move.

How do you need God to strengthen you right now? Where are you tempted to deviate or defend or take a detour? The God who stirs your heart with discontent is the same who will fill it with strength when discouragement sets in. I do not know what the future holds for followers of Christ here in America, but the trends seem to suggest we are losing popularity with the culture. And as that happens, accusations will fly. If discouragement comes your way and you are tempted to get off the wall, pray like Nehemiah did, that God would help you persevere, and live a life like Nehemiah did so that any unseemly accusation couldn't possibly be true.

**Threat #3: Deceive to disqualify.** There are voices that will tempt you to turn your back on God and the call he has on your life.

**[Nehemiah 6:10-14] <sup>10</sup> Now when I went into the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, son of Mehetabel, who was confined to his home, he said, "Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple. Let us close the doors of the temple, for they are coming to kill you. They are coming to kill you by night." <sup>11</sup> But I said, "Should such a man as I run away? And what man such as I could go into the temple and live? I will not go in." <sup>12</sup> And I understood and saw that God had not sent him, but he had pronounced the prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. <sup>13</sup> For this purpose he was hired, that I should be afraid and act in this way and sin, and so they could give me a bad name in order to taunt me. <sup>14</sup> Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God, according to these things that they did, and also the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who wanted to make me afraid.**

Shemaiah appeared to be a friend at first but turned out to be in cahoots with Nehemiah's enemies. He manufactured a prophecy that Nehemiah was in danger to trick him into fleeing to

the temple to save himself. Such a move would have disqualified Nehemiah from his position because he would have disregarded the Word of God and call of God.

First, he would have sinned by entering the temple because he wasn't a priest. If someone's counsel to you includes disobeying God's Word, it should immediately be dismissed. Cutting corners is never God's solution. Additionally, Nehemiah fleeing to the temple was tantamount to him leaving his post. He would have lost all credibility with his people and his actions would have communicated God could not protect them as they finished the wall. This would have certainly brought taunts from Israel's enemies, most likely including, "He doesn't trust in your God, and neither should you. Abandon the wall." Nehemiah's shame would become Israel's shame and ultimately God's shame.

So how does Nehemiah recognize what's going on and resist? V 12 "And I understood and saw that God had not sent him." **When you know the person of God, you recognize the ways of God.** It's through that discernment that you're able to recognize if something is godly or not. But it is not something that happens by accident. Like any relationship, it takes time and intention. **When you know the person of God, you recognize your identity in God.** Nehemiah says, "Should a man such as I run away?" I believe he's talking about his role as governor and leader of the Jews, but I also believe he's talking about his spiritual identity. God did not create him and send him to be a fearful leader who runs and hides. He sent him to be his bold and faithful representative and to lead the restoration of his people. The more you and I know God and know who we are in Him, the more likely we will be to finish strong.

**[Nehemiah 6:15-16] <sup>15</sup> So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. <sup>16</sup> And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem, for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.**

Nehemiah crossed the finish line, in 52 days! If you have been with us the whole series, you know what an accomplishment that is. But he never wavered. **He was a man of deep faith, formed by deep dependence.** He showed the best way to answer a threat is to keep going and live out God's call in your lives. And in the end, it wasn't him who got the credit. It was God, even in the eyes of Israel's enemies.

Every single one of us in the room who is a follower of Jesus is given the opportunity to say the same phrase uttered by Nehemiah in this passage: "I am doing a great work." It is great work because it is a great God who assigned it to us. It is a great God who will give us the faith and power to see it through until the end, even when threats come. And it's a great God who will ultimately get the credit for it when you and I finish strong.