

Nehemiah 6:1-7:3 Reacting to Rumors

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Did you ever get the impression that doing the right thing was going to be easy?

It's not always. It may be simple, it may be clear, it may be straight forward, but doing the right thing is NOT always easy.

We're going through Nehemiah, looking at the way God used this man to rebuild the city of Jerusalem back in the 5th century BC. We've seen that God gave him the general direction of what needed to be done and that he had the permission of the King of the Persian Empire to go back and do the work, so you might be tempted to think this would be a slam-dunk. No problem. God is on his side, the King is on His side--he should be able to get things done quickly.

But that's not what we've seen, is it? Once Nehemiah knew what he was supposed to do, he had to travel 800 miles across the deserts of the Middle East – from Iran to Jerusalem – a journey that may have taken about four months.

And then, when he arrived, he received a less than enthusiastic welcome from the surrounding people and their leaders. They had a pretty good thing going and weren't interested in any new comers to the neighborhood. Does that sound familiar to anyone? Have you ever been the new guy or girl trying to fit into a group at school or at work? It can be hard, everyone already knows each other, they've already figured things out, and now you show up and you're not sure who these people are, or how to get along, or what they're really all about.

Well, as we said, Nehemiah found out the hard way that they weren't going to be supportive of what he had come to do. And that was the first opposition we saw – as Nehemiah rallied the Jews to rebuild the city, they faced opposition from the outside. But, Nehemiah was able to encourage the people – to remind them that they were doing a work for God, and even though they had to set a guard to protect themselves, they got to work and started rebuilding the walls that had been broken down.

But once they overcame the external opposition they had to deal with internal opposition, and that did what the external opposition couldn't – it stopped the construction as Jews complained about being taken advantage of by their fellow countrymen. And last week we talked about the fact that the best way to overcome that kind of infighting is to agree on the direction we all ought to be working toward, and to let God establish that direction for us.

Well, this week, we see a new form of opposition arise – it’s a direct attack against Nehemiah himself, and it will take the form of rumors, gossip, and good old fashioned pre-school style tattletale telling.

If you’ve ever dealt with people talking behind your back, lying to you, spreading rumors about you, or calling you names, there might be some things here you can relate to.

1 Now it happened when Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab, and the rest of our enemies heard that I had rebuilt the wall, and *that* there were no breaks left in it (though at that time I had not hung the doors in the gates), 2 that Sanballat and Geshem sent to me, saying, “Come, let us meet together among the villages in the plain of Ono.” But they thought to do me harm.

These leaders of the surrounding areas are the same guys who have opposed him before. Now they’re calling him out. They want to have a little get together – you know, just to talk, right? But Nehemiah sees through it, he can tell there is no value in it.

3 So I sent messengers to them, saying, “I *am* doing a great work, so that I cannot come down. Why should the work cease while I leave it and go down to you?”

So, he says, “I’m kind of busy here, what do you want?”

You have to love this guy – isn’t this what we all want to say? “Thanks for the invite to your next meeting, but I’m busy doing actual work. Do you think you can make it without me? Oh, and by the way, could you renew all my annual computer based training requirements while you’re at it? That would be great, thanks!”

Unfortunately, they don’t give up they keep sending him invites.

4 But they sent me this message four times, and I answered them in the same manner.

5 Then Sanballat sent his servant to me as before, the fifth time, with an open letter in his hand.

Back in these days, formal correspondence was usually rolled up and then sealed. The seal was made of wax and imprinted with the signet ring of the one sending the message. This letter was left open--it was addressed to Nehemiah but they wanted everyone else to know what it said.

So, this is like an email sent to you but they cc’d everyone in the office – or like a post on Facebook or Twitter – it’s addressed to you personally, but they’re including everyone else so they can see as well. Don’t you love stuff like that? Especially when they include your boss or all kinds of people who have nothing to do with the situation?

6 In it was written:

It is reported among the nations, and Geshem says, *that* you and the Jews plan to rebel; therefore, according to these rumors, you are rebuilding the wall, that you may be their king. 7 And you have also appointed prophets to proclaim concerning you at Jerusalem, saying, “*There is a king in Judah!*” Now these matters will be reported to the king. So come, therefore, and let us consult together.

“We’ve heard these rumors about you,” they say, “and we just want to know if it’s true.”

It’s been said that *gossip is when you hear something you like about someone you don’t.*

So, Sanballat and Tobiah try to pretend like they’re really just looking out for Nehemiah’s best interests here, just trying to get to the bottom of the nasty rumors; rumors that could lead to his arrest and possible death if he’s really suspected of leading a rebellion.

Now, how would you react if you were Nehemiah? If you were trying to do this selfless thing – remember we read last week how he was personally involved in building the walls, that he wasn’t collecting the governor’s taxes like he could have, that he was providing food for the needy, and how even his own servants were out doing the construction work instead of taking care of him and his house. He’s doing everything he can for the benefit of others and now he’s being accused of just doing it all for himself.

How do you react when someone says this kind of stuff about you, when people question or twist your motives? Do you get defensive? Does it get under your skin? And how much time do you spend going over it all in your head? How many times have we made arguments, presented evidence, and rendered the verdict in the courtroom of our minds?

But when you do that, what are you taking your time and attention away from? We spend a lot of time rehashing things in our mind, or with our friends, time that we could spend *actually doing things.*

So watch how Nehemiah responds:

8 Then I sent to him, saying, “No such things as you say are being done, but you invent them in your own heart.”

They were trying to talk around the issue, and Nehemiah calls them out. That’s bold. But he had the maturity and the self-control to know what was going on:

9 For they all *were trying to make us afraid*, saying, “Their hands will be weakened in the work, and it will not be done.”
Now therefore, *O God*, strengthen my hands.

Nehemiah saw it all for what it was – a subversive attempt to use fear to stop the work *that God had called him to do.* When you’re headed in the right direction, doing the right thing, don’t expect everyone you meet to be encouraging about your efforts. Even when you bend

over backward to do things for all the right reasons, someone can still find a way to misconstrue or misportray your actions. So how do you respond?

If you're like Nehemiah, you keep your head down and *stick to what God has called you to do*. Don't give up, don't give in to distraction and discouragement, and don't waste too much time defending yourself. Someone once said, you watch your character and let God watch your reputation. In other words, you just focus on doing what is right because it is right, and let God take care of how people judge you. After all, He's the only one whose verdict really matters.

So instead of getting distracted by these lies, Nehemiah responds by asking God to strengthen his hands. He doesn't try to clear things up; he keeps on doing the very thing they're accusing him of.

You can never completely control how people are going to take you, all you can do is assess the motive of your own heart, and if it's in the right place, then do exactly what Nehemiah does here – keep pressing on, and let the results speak for themselves. That's what good leaders do, isn't it? They lead. They know the right direction and they press on, even when the going is tough and they don't worry too much about what people are going to say.

Unfortunately, it doesn't stop there for Nehemiah.

10 Afterward I came to the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, the son of Mehetabel, who *was* a secret informer; and he said, "Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and let us close the doors of the temple, for they are coming to kill you; indeed, at night they will come to kill you."

So this guy says, "There's a plot to murder you. Come hide in the Temple. God will protect you, they won't come in there after you."

Some of you might remember Manuel Noriega tried this in Panama – when the US invaded in 1989 he tried to hide out in the embassy of the Catholic Church. But Nehemiah had no such plans:

11 And I said, "Should such a man as I flee? And who *is there* such as I who would go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in!"

Once again, Nehemiah proves that he's the kind of leader we would all love to follow. He understood what Jesus said many years later, that the enemy desires to strike the shepherd in order to scatter the flock. How could Nehemiah expect to take refuge in the Temple and yet ask his people to stay out in the open and keep working on the wall? He couldn't, and he knew it. If there was danger, so be it, but he needed to be out and about encouraging, supervising, and inspiring the people.

And then, after he made the difficult choice of selfless service, he learned the threat wasn't quite what it was cracked up to be:

12 Then I perceived that God had not sent him at all, but that he pronounced *this* prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. 13 For this reason he *was* hired, that I should be **afraid** and act that way and sin, so *that* they might have *cause* for an evil report, that they might reproach me.

14 My God, remember Tobiah and Sanballat, according to these their works, and the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who would have made me **afraid**.

It was all a set-up, a trap, a test. And fortunately, Nehemiah passed. But now, notice, he says, “God, would you please remember what these men and women have tried to do, and would You take care of it.”

Once again, you take care of your character – you make the right choices, even when it’s hard, even if you’re afraid of what might happen - ask God to give you the strength to do what is right, and then let Him take care of your reputation.

If you start working on your reputation, you’re going to have to spend an awful lot of time cultivating it. You’re going to be constantly checking in to see what people are thinking and saying about you. You’re going to constantly wonder how people took that text, that message, or that statement. You’re going to wonder what they think about your outfit, or your car, your living room style or your presentation. You’re going to give up the opportunity to lead for the opportunity to serve – but it’s only to serve their opinions. And all the time you spend chasing other people’s approval is time you could spend making progress in a greater work.

And for Nehemiah, paying attention to the greater work eventually paid off.

15 So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth *day* of Elul, in fifty-two days. 16 And it happened, when all our enemies heard *of it*, and all the nations around us saw *these things*, that they were very disheartened in their own eyes; for they perceived that this work was done by our God.

There was no denying the fact that God had been at work. He was the one who initiated the project in the first place, He was the one who gave Nehemiah favor, who protected them when the work first started, He was the one who convicted them about the need for change when they were fighting from within, and He is the one who Nehemiah was counting on to protect His reputation. Behind every difficulty the people had found His strength.

Next week we’ll see the celebration they had to mark the occasion. But first, Nehemiah just remembered one more issue they had:

17 Also in those days the nobles of Judah sent many letters to Tobiah, and *the letters of Tobiah* came to them. 18 For many in Judah were pledged to him, because he was the son-in-law of Shechaniah the son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah. 19 Also they reported his good deeds before me, and reported my words to him. Tobiah sent letters to **frighten** me.

People inside the city were connected to Tobiah and kept trying to tell Nehemiah what a great guy he was, and meanwhile they reported back to Tobiah everything Nehemiah said. You've been in one of these situations before, right? Where people are your friend, and the other guy or girl's friend, and they keep running back and forth between the two of you. It's something of a popularity contest as everyone tries to figure out what side they're on. But once again, Nehemiah doesn't respond to it, he blows it off and stays focused on the mission because he knows the city is still vulnerable.

7:1 Then it was, when the wall was built and I had hung the doors, when the gatekeepers, the singers, and the Levites had been appointed, 2 that I gave the charge of Jerusalem to my brother Hanani, and Hananiah the leader of the citadel, for he was a faithful man and feared God more than many.
3 And I said to them, "Do not let the gates of Jerusalem be opened until the sun is hot; and while they stand *guard*, let them shut and bar the doors; and appoint guards from among the inhabitants of Jerusalem, one at his watch station and another in front of his own house."

As we said when we first started this morning – doing the right thing isn't always easy. And it doesn't mean everyone will join you, help you, or like you. But, as we have seen with Nehemiah, you can count on God to watch over you and ask Him to be your defense against those who oppose you.

After all, He knows exactly what you're going through. When Jesus came to this exact same city 500 years later, He faced external opposition. Herod got wind of His birth and tried to kill him as a child. And when He grew up and began His ministry the external opposition continued from the Scribes and Pharisees and other leaders. Meanwhile, he also experienced internal conflict as the disciples competed for position and rank, argued over who was the best, and jostled for the number two position in His coming kingdom. And then, there were the personal attacks – those on the outside spread rumors about Him and questioned His ambitions – they called him a glutton and drunk, they said He did miracles by the power of Satan, they said He was going to lead a rebellion against the king, and one of His own disciples lured Him into a trap and sold Him out.

Why did He put Himself through all of that? For the greater work of saving us. He suffered for our gain. Much like Nehemiah suffered for the sake of rebuilding a city for others to live in, Jesus suffered to gain us entrance to the Heavenly City. There's no getting in without Him, but He offers citizenship to everyone who is willing to say, "I've blown it, I've lived life my way – I've chased after my own reputation and lived for the expectations of others instead of God." If you can admit that, and repent from it, you can come in.

And then, for those who have surrendered control of their lives, He assigns us new roles, He offers us new chances to lead and to serve. He gives us new tasks and strengthens us for them. He's the only one whose opinion really matters. So don't waste your life trying to impress others, or trying to manage your public image. Don't go chasing after opinions or tracking down rumors. Hear from God, understand His values and His priorities, receive

your to-do list from Him, and then go off and do it, asking Him to guard you, to strengthen you, and to be your defense.

Spend your life building something worthwhile, something that will be a blessing to others. It won't be easy, but there's nothing to fear because He'll never leave you alone.