

Nehemiah 6

In today's lesson we are going to take a look at the external opposition that Nehemiah faced while trying to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem. However, since the opposition didn't start in chapter 6, we need to take a step back in order to view the bigger picture.

The first time we meet Nehemiah's enemies is in chapter 2. After Nehemiah obtained the king's permission and support to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem, he traveled to that city. When other people found out what was going on, some of them were very unhappy about it:

Nehemiah 2:10: “When Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, heard of it, it grieved them exceedingly that there was come a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel.”

Sanballat and Tobiah were not at all pleased that someone had come to help the Israelites. These two people were Israel's enemies, and they did *not* want to see her rise again. Before we get into what they did, however, it's worth spending a little time explaining who these people are. Sanballat the Horonite is thought to be from the town of Horonaim (which is why he's called a Horonite) of the country of Moab. This means he was a Moabite. Tobiah, on the other hand, was an Ammonite.

The Bible has quite a bit to say about these two peoples. It turns out that both of them are the descendents of Lot's daughters:

Genesis 19:36: “Thus were both the daughters of Lot with child by their father.
37 And the first born bare a son, and called his name Moab: the same is the father of the Moabites unto this day.
38 And the younger, she also bare a son, and called his name Benammi: the same is the father of the children of Ammon unto this day.”

In other words, the Ammonites and the Moabites were the product of incest. Lot was Abraham's nephew, so these two people groups were related to Abraham, even though they weren't his direct descendents.

These nations appeared quite frequently in the Old Testament. The Bible tells us that they were both cursed by God and were not allowed to enter into the congregation of the Lord. The book of Deuteronomy tells us why:

Deuteronomy 23:3: “An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord; even to their tenth generation shall they not enter into the congregation of the Lord for ever:
4 Because they met you not with bread and with water in the way, when ye came forth out of Egypt; and because they hired against thee Balaam the son of Beor of Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse thee.”

Even though the Israelites had not done anything against either of these groups, they still hated Israel. They even hired Balaam to curse Israel, in an attempt to harm that nation and cause them to fail. Israel had not done anything to deserve this hate – they were simply hated, and so God forbade them from ever entering His congregation.

Later, when Israel sinned against God, the Lord turned Israel over to the king of Moab. The Ammonites helped the Moabite king to take over Israel. In other words, Moab and Ammon had once again teamed up to cause Israel problems:

Judges 3:12: “And the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of the Lord: and the Lord strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done evil in the sight of the Lord.

13 And he gathered unto him the children of Ammon and Amalek, and went and smote Israel, and possessed the city of palm trees.

14 So the children of Israel served Eglon the king of Moab eighteen years.”

God later delivered Israel from the Moabite king, but Israel refused to serve God for very long. When Israel started serving the gods of the Moabites and the Ammonites, the Lord once again turned them over to their enemies:

Judges 10:6: “And the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of the Lord, and served Baalim, and Ashtaroath, and the gods of Syria, and the gods of Zidon, and the gods of Moab, and the gods of the children of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines, and forsook the Lord, and served not him.

7 And the anger of the Lord was hot against Israel, and he sold them into the hands of the Philistines, and into the hands of the children of Ammon.

8 And that year they vexed and oppressed the children of Israel: eighteen years, all the children of Israel that were on the other side Jordan in the land of the Amorites, which is in Gilead.

9 Moreover the children of Ammon passed over Jordan to fight also against Judah, and against Benjamin, and against the house of Ephraim; so that Israel was sore distressed.”

As we can see, the Ammonites have been Israel's enemy since the time of the exodus. They have hated Israel for centuries and they repeatedly fought against Israel and conquered her cities. In fact, Saul's first act as king was to fight against the Ammonites:

1 Samuel 11:11: “And it was so on the morrow, that Saul put the people in three companies; and they came into the midst of the host in the morning watch, and slew the Ammonites until the heat of the day: and it came to pass, that they which remained were scattered, so that two of them were not left together.”

Later, King David tried to make peace with the Ammonites. His offer was roughly rejected:

2 Samuel 10:1: “And it came to pass after this, that the king of the children of Ammon died, and Hanun his son reigned in his stead.

2 Then said David, I will shew kindness unto Hanun the son of Nahash, as his father shewed kindness unto me. And David sent to comfort him by the hand of his servants for his father. And David's servants came into the land of the children of Ammon.

3 And the princes of the children of Ammon said unto Hanun their lord, Thinkest

thou that David doth honour thy father, that he hath sent comforters unto thee? hath not David rather sent his servants unto thee, to search the city, and to spy it out, and to overthrow it?

4 Wherefore Hanun took David's servants, and shaved off the one half of their beards, and cut off their garments in the middle, even to their buttocks, and sent them away.”

Not only did the king of Ammon treat David's peace envoy very shamefully, but when the king realized that he had offended David he decided to *declare war on David* instead of apologizing! That is how much the Ammonites hated Israel.

Interestingly, the Ammonites proved to be David's downfall. When David tarried in Jerusalem and committed adultery with Bathsheba, do you know who his armies were fighting? That's right – it was the Ammonites:

2 Samuel 11:1: “And it came to pass, after the year was expired, at the time when kings go forth to battle, that David sent Joab, and his servants with him, and all Israel; and they destroyed the children of Ammon, and besieged Rabbah. But David tarried still at Jerusalem.

2 And it came to pass in an eveningtide, that David arose from off his bed, and walked upon the roof of the king's house: and from the roof he saw a woman washing herself; and the woman was very beautiful to look upon.

3 And David sent and enquired after the woman. And one said, Is not this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?”

And who did David get to kill Bathsheba's husband, Uriah the Hittite? That's right – it was the Ammonites:

2 Samuel 12:9: “Wherefore hast thou despised the commandment of the Lord, to do evil in his sight? thou hast killed Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and hast taken his wife to be thy wife, and hast slain him with the sword of the children of Ammon.”

These two groups also played a role in the downfall of Solomon. It turns out that among his wives were Moabites and Ammonites:

1 Kings 11:1: “But king Solomon loved many strange women, together with the daughter of Pharaoh, women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Zidonians, and Hittites:”

These women led him to worship the false gods of the Moabites and Ammonites, which led to the kingdom being taken away from Solomon's son:

1 Kings 11:31: “And he said to Jeroboam, Take thee ten pieces: for thus saith the Lord, the God of Israel, Behold, I will rend the kingdom out of the hand of Solomon, and will give ten tribes to thee: . . .

33 Because that they have forsaken me, and have worshipped Ashtoreth the

goddess of the Zidonians, Chemosh the god of the Moabites, and Milcom the god of the children of Ammon, and have not walked in my ways, to do that which is right in mine eyes, and to keep my statutes and my judgments, as did David his father.”

Interestingly, Solomon passed his kingdom on to his son Rehoboam. It turns out that Rehoboam's mother was – you guessed it – an Ammonite:

1 Kings 14:21: “And Rehoboam the son of Solomon reigned in Judah. Rehoboam was forty and one years old when he began to reign, and he reigned seventeen years in Jerusalem, the city which the Lord did choose out of all the tribes of Israel, to put his name there. And his mother's name was Naamah an Ammonitess.”

I could go on, but I think you get the point: the Moabites and Ammonites have been causing problems for Israel for a long, long time. It should come as no surprise that an Ammonite was unhappy to hear that someone was seeking the welfare of the children of Israel.

The very first thing that Sanballat and Tobiah did was accuse Nehemiah of treason:

Nehemiah 2:19: “But when Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arabian, heard it, they laughed us to scorn, and despised us, and said, What is this thing that ye do? will ye rebel against the king?”

The charge of treason was utterly baseless, but it was still a very dangerous threat. All these enemies had to do was persuade the king that Nehemiah was leading a rebellion, and that would put an end to everything Nehemiah was attempting to do – and it would probably get Nehemiah killed as well. This false charge wasn't just an attempt to stop Israel; it was also an attempt to end Nehemiah's life. But it didn't work. Nehemiah had an answer ready for them:

Nehemiah 2:20: “Then answered I them, and said unto them, The God of heaven, he will prosper us; therefore we his servants will arise and build: but ye have no portion, nor right, nor memorial, in Jerusalem.”

One of the things we see in the life of Nehemiah is that whenever he had a problem he always put his trust in God. When he wanted to go before the king and plead on behalf of Jerusalem, he fasted and prayed. Here, when his life was being threatened, he trusted in God and said that the Lord would prosper them. His faith was solidly fixed on God – and on nothing else.

He was also not shy about putting the Ammonites in their place. Nehemiah pointed out that God gave Jerusalem to the Jews, and not to anyone else. The Ammonites had no claim to the city. They were meddling in something that did not concern them.

In chapter 6, when the rebuilding project was well under way, Sanballat once again tried to get Nehemiah killed:

Nehemiah 6:1: “Now it came to pass when Sanballat, and Tobiah, and Geshem the Arabian, and the rest of our enemies, heard that I had builded the wall, and that there was no breach left therein; (though at that time I had not set up the doors upon the gates;)

2 That Sanballat and Geshem sent unto me, saying, Come, let us meet together in

some one of the villages in the plain of Ono. But they thought to do me mischief."

Sanballat's plan was obvious: he wanted to meet Nehemiah so he could kill him and put a stop to the work. He understood that Nehemiah was the one driving the entire effort. As we discussed when we studied chapter 2, the effort to rebuild the walls was Nehemiah's doing. In fact, Nehemiah actually had to persuade the people of Jerusalem to help him – it wasn't their idea at all. If Sanballat could kill Nehemiah then there was a good chance the entire project would fail.

But Nehemiah didn't fall for it:

Nehemiah 6:3: "And I sent messengers unto them, saying, I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down: why should the work cease, whilst I leave it, and come down to you?

4 Yet they sent unto me four times after this sort; and I answered them after the same manner."

Sanballat repeatedly tried to get Nehemiah to come see him so that he could kill Nehemiah, but it didn't work. Nehemiah had a job to do and he stuck to it. He stayed focused on the task at hand and refused to be distracted.

When Sanballat saw that his trick wasn't working, he decided to start issuing threats:

Nehemiah 6:5: "Then sent Sanballat his servant unto me in like manner the fifth time with an open letter in his hand;

6 Wherein was written, It is reported among the heathen, and Gashmu saith it, that thou and the Jews think to rebel: for which cause thou buildest the wall, that thou mayest be their king, according to these words.

7 And thou hast also appointed prophets to preach of thee at Jerusalem, saying, There is a king in Judah: and now shall it be reported to the king according to these words. Come now therefore, and let us take counsel together."

This time Sanballat told Nehemiah that if he didn't agree to a face-to-face meeting, he would tell the king that Nehemiah was planning on launching a rebellion. In other words, he would lie and accuse Nehemiah of treason – something that stood a good chance of getting Nehemiah executed. This was a very serious threat; kings did not take accusations like that lightly.

Of course, everything that Sanballat said was a lie. Nehemiah had no desire to be king; his only concern was the welfare of his people. Nehemiah had not appointed anyone to go around saying that he was a king. Everything that Sanballat was saying was an outright lie – and that's exactly what Nehemiah told him:

Nehemiah 6:8: "Then I sent unto him, saying, There are no such things done as thou sayest, but thou feignest them out of thine own heart.

9 For they all made us afraid, saying, Their hands shall be weakened from the work, that it be not done. Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands."

Sanballat wanted to terrify the people so that they would stop working on the rebuilding project. He wanted the Jews to start thinking that rebuilding the wall was nothing short of treason, and if they kept at it the king would come and kill them all. Sanballat was trying to use lies and false accusations

to fill people with terror so they would stop what they were doing – but it didn't work. When Nehemiah was afraid, he went to God and asked God to strengthen them and give them courage. The Lord was Nehemiah's refuge.

Notice that Nehemiah did not fall for Sanballat's trap. Instead he simply told them that they were lying, and he refused to stop working and refused to give in to the blackmail. He stayed focused on what had to be done and he kept working on it, trusting in God to take care of them and to see the work through.

Since Sanballat's plans weren't working, he then shifted strategies:

Nehemiah 6:10: “Afterward I came unto the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah the son of Mehetabeel, who was shut up; and he said, Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and let us shut the doors of the temple: for they will come to slay thee; yea, in the night will they come to slay thee.”

The purpose of this threat was to get Nehemiah to sin, so that Sanballat could bring a bad report about him and cause the work to cease. However, Nehemiah refused to give in:

Nehemiah 6:11: “And I said, Should such a man as I flee? and who is there, that, being as I am, would go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in.”

12 And, lo, I perceived that God had not sent him; but that he pronounced this prophecy against me: for Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him.

13 Therefore was he hired, that I should be afraid, and do so, and sin, and that they might have matter for an evil report, that they might reproach me.

14 My God, think thou upon Tobiah and Sanballat according to these their works, and on the prophetess Noadiah, and the rest of the prophets, that would have put me in fear.”

Nehemiah realized what Sanballat was trying to do, and he did not give in to the temptation. He refused to be afraid, even though Sanballat was trying very hard to sow fear. This fear tactic is very effective; people are often willing to do a great many things when they are afraid, even things that they know are wrong. They will sin if they think it will help them or save their life – but Nehemiah refused. He did not give in to fear, and he would not flee – even when he was told that his life depended on it.

However, Nehemiah had another problem. It turns out that Tobiah had a lot of political connections in Jerusalem:

Nehemiah 6:17: “Moreover in those days the nobles of Judah sent many letters unto Tobiah, and the letters of Tobiah came unto them.

18 For there were many in Judah sworn unto him, because he was the son in law of Shechaniah the son of Arah; and his son Johanan had taken the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah.

19 Also they reported his good deeds before me, and uttered my words to him. And Tobiah sent letters to put me in fear.”

This may be why the wall hadn't been rebuilt in the first place: the enemies of God had many friends in Jerusalem. Tobiah the Ammonite used his connections to send threatening letters that were calculated to put Nehemiah in fear. He was hoping that he could weaken the project and get Nehemiah

in trouble – but he failed. Despite all of their efforts, the wall was completed:

Nehemiah 6:15: “So the wall was finished in the twenty and fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty and two days.

16 And it came to pass, that when all our enemies heard thereof, and all the heathen that were about us saw these things, they were much cast down in their own eyes: for they perceived that this work was wrought of our God.”

To the enemies of God, this was a staggering blow. They knew that the Lord had accomplished this, and they realized they had been utterly defeated. Nehemiah was a man of faith and a man of integrity, and he refused to give in to their threats or to the fear that they were trying to spread. He saw the project through to the end, and thanks to the grace of God the project was a success. The wall was rebuilt, thus providing much-needed protection to Jerusalem. It was a mighty victory.

All of this brings to mind a passage from the New Testament:

Ephesians 6:13: “Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

14 Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness;

15 And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace;

16 Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked.”

Nehemiah did exactly what this passage says: he took the shield of faith and used it to neutralize the attacks of the enemies of God. When the forces of darkness tried to terrify him, he refused to be afraid and instead trusted in God. The book of Psalms put it this way:

Psalms 56:1: “Be merciful unto me, O God: for man would swallow me up; he fighting daily oppresseth me.

2 Mine enemies would daily swallow me up: for they be many that fight against me, O thou most High.

3 What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee.”

Nehemiah illustrates this passage beautifully: when he was afraid, he trusted in God. When he needed strength, he went to God. God was his refuge and his strength – his ever-present help in times of trouble.

This is exactly what we need to do when we are in trouble. Instead of giving in to fear and doing terrible things, we should instead trust God and go to Him for strength and comfort. We should stand in our integrity and refuse to give in to fear and temptation. It is high time that we learned to use the shield of faith, for it is a powerful defense against evil.