

Strengthen My Hands

Nehemiah 6:1-14

There is this common weakness among many of us to fear, to fail in courage and brave resolution to do what's right because we fear those who are our opponents. What has become obvious in our study of Nehemiah is that he had no such fear, and his courage is a marvelous subject for us to study this afternoon. Courage in the face of fearful circumstances.

Courage is so necessary because of the nature of our enemies. As children of the devil, they are deceivers. They are liars and schemers. They are conspirators. Conspiring to come up with any plan that will succeed in diminishing our work in building the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. The obvious point that we see from those schemers is that,

I. DECEIT IS A MEANS THAT WICKED MEN USE TO OPPOSE THE WORK OF THE KINGDOM.

Deceit. Untruth. Lies. Slander. You all know what I'm talking about. Let me explain the deceit that we find here.

v.1-2

They were, of course, seeking to lure Nehemiah to a place of their choice and to eliminate him. And he discerned that, no doubt by the wisdom of God which had been given to him. So he declined their invitation. Then they hired a prophet, hoping that Nehemiah would listen to his words. He didn't.

v.10-12

But maybe the suggestion to meet with Sanballat would have been a good idea. Maybe the suggestion to flee to the temple for safety was a good idea. Maybe in those ways, Nehemiah could protect himself from danger. But of course, he couldn't. Because

both of those suggestions were traps. And to be as wise and courageous as Nehemiah,

A. We must avoid deceitful entrapment.

We need to courage to resist the urge to protect ourselves, realizing the presence of such deceit. It was a very dangerous trap, to meet with Sanballat among the villages in the plain of Ono. Why? Because unprotected by his own people, he would quickly become a victim.

We need to avoid such traps that Satan might lay for us, as well. And the beginning of that is to identify them as traps! They look like opportunities to benefit and gain protection, but they are traps. And how often do we foolishly walk right into those traps, beguiled by the appeal of something that looks good.

Have you ever had to catch a mouse with a trap? I certainly have, and have been quite successful! We are still trying to rid our garage and laundry room of mice, so it is active and ongoing endeavor. I use a live trap, and it isn't hard to catch them. We put some peanut butter on the inside of the trap, luring them very easily into that trap that would immediately close down upon them as a prison.

And sometimes, at the hands of Satan, we become as gullible and as foolish as those mice, entrapped by deceit with which he presents himself. My friends, Satan is a liar and the father of lies. And he seeks to entrap us often. And he will use very sweet peanut butter to entice us.

That entrapment comes in a variety of forms. Enticement. Flattery. Seduction. Often, invitations to sensual pleasure. They are all examples of Satan's deceit. All ways in which he entraps the simpleminded man who does not realize that he is being led

down a path to his own destruction. It will cost him his life.

Beware deceitful entrapment!

Gen. 3:1 “Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, “Has God indeed said, ‘You shall not eat of every tree of the garden’?””

That’s a subtle, entrapment, calling into question what God has said, and doing it in a winsome and seductive manner.

Nehemiah recognized the harm of the invitation he received.

v.2

And he recognized the second attempted entrapment also, and this one was perhaps even more subtle and clever. It was an appeal to protect himself by fleeing to temple for safety. It was an appeal to his sense of self-preservation, which is itself a very good thing!

v.10

That’s a legitimate suggestion on the surface, because OT law allowed for a person to flee to the temple to seek asylum, particularly for someone guilty of unintentional manslaughter but not guilty of murder. Cities of refuge were actually set up for that purpose of providing asylum.

But Nehemiah saw through the deceit. After all, he was a layman, not a priest. He couldn’t enter the temple. And as the king’s attendant, he was most a likely also a eunuch, and on that basis forbidden from entering the temple as well. So he wisely refused the offer.

v.11

And he understood the source.

v.12

What a wise man he was, for had he entered that temple, he would have been in violation of God’s law, as a layman and as eunuch. And had he violated God’s laws himself, had he committed a transgression of the laws of the temple, he would have become immediately discredited in the eyes of the people. His moral authority to lead would have been destroyed.

As would his reputation for courage, for who wants a leader ready to flee for his own protection at the first sign of danger. Indeed, Nehemiah is able to present himself as a man of great courage, who would rather die an honorable death in the exercise of his duty than to live in an inglorious retreat from his responsibilities. Honor and integrity go hand in hand with courage.

Sadly, in the experiences of our own country, one of our great maladies is the general willingness of people in our country to remain indifferent in the presence of ungodliness and immorality in our leaders. We don’t care. We no longer wish for ourselves leaders of courage and virtue. We only wish for ourselves leaders who will make us abundant and wealthy in the things of this world. And that willingness is, in itself, another of Satan’s schemes to undermine the glory and the virtue of godly, biblical morality as it defined by God’s holy law!

As a society, broadly speaking, we just don’t care about virtue any more. We don’t care about godliness and honor. Not if we can keep our wealth and power. What a horrible trap Satan has laid for us with the lure of that worldly wealth. And how fully we as a society have walked into that trap, tasting the peanut butter and unable to see that the door to the trap has swung closed. And so the Apostle Paul says to us,

Eph. 6:11 “Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.”

Nehemiah faces another of those wiles in his encounter with his enemies here in Nehemiah 6, and that is slander. From his example, the lesson for us is that,

B. We must be aware of deceitful slander.

Again, that slander came when Nehemiah refused to meet with Sanballat.

v.3

Yet they were persistent.

v.4

So they resorted to deceit.

v.5-7

It's hard to fight against this sort of deceit, for it was so clever. It was insidious. It was credible! The rumor that Nehemiah was out to rebel against the King and become king himself was believable. Nehemiah, remember, was a close confidant to the king, the chief cupbearer, and the charge of high treason was serious indeed. There are certainly other historically documented cases of servants to the Persian king rebelling against him. And Nehemiah might instinctively become fearful. It would be understandable. But he recognized the slander for what it was, demonstrating great wisdom.

Actually, to a man not consumed with fear, to a man not beguiled by insecurity, the foolishness of the slander was obvious. After all, why should Sanballat want to meet with him? It could be interpreted immediately by the Persian authorities as collaboration. Why should a Samaritan be interested in the welfare of the Jews?

And why did he sent an open letter, contrary to the custom of

the day in which letters would be sealed? Why would he further spread the rumor of Nehemiah's alleged rebellion and then suggest meeting him in private? It just didn't make sense, not to a man who resisted the impulses of fear and insecurity. It just didn't make sense to a man of courage. And,

II. COURAGE IS THE APPROPRIATE RESPONSE TO WICKED MEN WHO OPPOSE THE KINGDOM.

Courage! Nehemiah would not act in fear, for he was wise enough to realize that that is precisely what his enemies wished for!

v.9

Courage is based upon such wisdom. Courage is the context for such,

A. An insightful evaluation.

He looked at his enemies, and he evaluated them. He evaluated them accurately. They were trying to make him afraid, and he knew it. So how should you respond to people who are trying to intimidate you? Courage!

Have you ever been in a situation in which you were being intimidated? Being provoked to fear, so that you would stop doing whatever work you were doing? Well, if that work was God's work, then the intimidator was Satan! And you need to be able to recognize that!

There are so many ways in which we give in to that intimidation, and act in fear. There are many times in which we simply give in to intimidation and fear, with the desire for peace and self-preservation. And we fail to do what Nehemiah did, when he spoke,

B. A straightforward rebuke.

Instead of acting fearfully, he rebukes them!

v.8

He didn't even give credibility to the slanderous accusation by trying to defend himself! He saw through all their plans, and gave a short and curt reply. He rebukes them for the hardness of their hearts, and exposes their own motives. "No such things as you say are being done, but you invent them in your own heart."

That's how you answer slander! With a rebuke. Don't get defensive. Don't be fearful. And don't enter into a discussion. Just hold the high ground, and speak a straightforward rebuke. Nehemiah stood his ground with courage, and his strong leadership thwarted this attempt to end the work upon the city wall.

The church of Jesus Christ needs such men to lead today. Men who will have the courage to stand up and say, "No that is not right." Men with the courage to say when they are slandered and placed into personal jeopardy, "No that is not right."

Men like Martin Luther, who was put on trial with the possibility of losing his life for the sake of the doctrine of justification by faith alone, which he had rediscovered in Paul's letter to the church at Rome. And when faced by the demand to recant, to repudiate his own previous words, he refused. The words of his refusal fueled the very movement that brought about the reformation of the church. These were his words..."Unless I am convicted by Scripture or by right reason (for I trust neither in popes nor in councils, since they have often erred and contradicted themselves)--unless I am thus convinced, I am bound by the texts of the Bible, my conscience is captive to the Word of God, I neither can nor will recant anything, since it is neither right nor

safe to act against conscience. Here I stand. God help me. Amen."

That's courage! And that courage to respond to wicked men comes only through,

C. A specific prayer.

Courage didn't come to Nehemiah in his own strength. He prayed for it.

v.9

Pray for that strength for yourself, when you are oppressed or attacked in any form. Pray for that strength when you find yourself intimidated by someone who denies the knowledge of God and who wishes to ridicule and humiliate you. Pray for strength when you are called to stand up and issue a straightforward rebuke, needing to seize the opportunity to call sin sin, needing to seize the opportunity to urge someone you know unto repentance. Pray for strength when you wish to witness to another person and tell them about the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

Pray for strength when Satan succeeds in discouraging you. When your body is frail. When your soul is particularly subjected to temptation. Pray for strength when you find your zeal waning or your energy lacking. Or when you are discouraged or disheartened. Pray that God would strengthen your hands.

Courage is the product of fervent prayer. And it comes only to those who know by their own experience what it means to trust God, for,

III. TRUSTING GOD IS THE ONLY RELIABLE MEANS OF PROTECTION FROM WICKED MEN WHO OPPOSE THE WORK OF THE KINGDOM.

And trusting God has a lot to do with resisting the impulses of fear. Trusting God is the very opposite of fear. Notice what Nehemiah does.

v.13-14

Nehemiah rejects the foolish suggestion of the prophet to flee to the temple for safety. He realized that the prophet had been hired, and that his main objective was to instill fear, and in that fear, to bring about an impulsive reaction that would have been sin! In order to bring a reproach against Nehemiah.

Nehemiah was not impulsive. Whatever fear he might have felt in the surface experiences of his own emotions, he did not act according to fear. Instead, in the face of danger, he trusted. And so must we.

A. We must trust God instead of reacting impulsively in fear.

I hope you realize this, though I hope that you haven't had to learn it too deeply from your own experiences. But decisions made in fear are usually quite disastrous. If your motivation, if the controlling element in a decision you make is fear, you are more than likely going to make a bad decision. Even a disastrous decision. You may well bring reproach upon yourself.

In verse 14, Nehemiah speaks of his enemies as those "who wanted to make me afraid." They would have, if it were possible! But because Nehemiah trusted God, it wasn't possible! He would not fear. And he would not act in fear. He would do what was right, what he knew was right. He would trust God to give him strength.

And he would trust God to do something else, to take care of his enemies. If we are going to have the courage to do what is

right, and to avoid the traps your enemies would lay for us, then,

B. We must trust God to bring about his perfect justice.

God will take care of our enemies. We simply need to do what is right.

v.14

Nehemiah understood what Paul would teach many centuries later.

Rom. 12:19 "Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. 20 Therefore "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Sadly, tragically, there are few such courageous men today. And certainly, very few among the leaders of our own nation. Too few among the leaders of the church of Jesus Christ as well. There are too few courageous preachers. Too few with the wisdom and the courage of Nehemiah.

Let me tell you what preachers fear. Smallness. They fear that people will go to another church if they don't say the right things. They fear that horrible doom of being in a small church. And so they water down the strength of the doctrine they teach. There are many men reformed in theology who will refuse to faithfully teach the fullness of their understanding of the Scriptures because they fear that people will reject it and go to another church. Is it any wonder that there are so many large mega-churches in our day, but so little impact of the church upon this land in which we live!

Men such as Nehemiah don't become heroes today, because

we want instant heroes whose main qualification for being idolized is popularity. We want celebrities, not heroes. Sports superstars. Entertainers. The rich and beautiful. And successful. We measure a man by his popularity, and we honor him for the breadth of his appeal.

And that is all wrong. Nehemiah is a great man, and a great leader, worthy to be called a hero, for he is a man of courage who trusts God with all of his heart. May we learn to honor men such as him, and seek to imitate him in our own lives.