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Date: September 25, 2016

Title: 3 Temptations the Best Leaders Will Overcome

Text: Nehemiah 6:1-19

Today we're likely wrapping up this series from Nehemiah. That doesn't mean we won't look at Nehemiah some more. But today concludes this series of looking at the example of Nehemiah in Leadership. The series has focused on a project that Nehemiah took on: restoring the wall around the city of Jerusalem.

The city of Jerusalem had been attacked and ransacked by the Babylonian army many years before Nehemiah came on the scene. The people were enslaved and the walls of the city were destroyed. Years later a more benevolent Babylonian king came into power, and he began to allow the Israelite slaves to return to Jerusalem. Slowly the city began to be rebuilt, but the walls remained rubble. This left the city vulnerable to enemy attack. So Nehemiah, a slave with access to the king, asked to be given the opportunity to oversee the project of restoring the walls around the city of Jerusalem. The king gave the go ahead, and Nehemiah made the journey to Jerusalem to begin the process. He put together a plan. He recruited the people of Jerusalem to help him, and the project was underway. He faced criticism and opposition, and he had to confront some of the leaders of the city for financial improprieties, but HE KEPT MOVING FORWARD.

Now, today, we find ourselves at the most crucial part of the project: the last portion of the project. The work is ALMOST finished. The END is in sight. This is where we're sometimes tempted to let up just a little bit. It's also where the enemy usually comes at us in a last ditch effort to knock us off course. That's what happened to Nehemiah.

He and his team of volunteers had finished the wall – with the EXCEPTION of SETTING THE DOORS in the gates – when the troublemakers (chapter 6 calls them enemies) from chapter four, Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem, take another stab at putting Nehemiah out of business. Nehemiah deflected their efforts and got the job done in spite of them. He successfully conquered what we are calling the last temptations of leadership – those situations we face during the last portion of just about every leadership project we pursue.

Today we'll take a look at these temptations. They're important to know about, because if you lead in any endeavor, you will face these situations – maybe at the 90% mark, maybe at the 10% mark, maybe somewhere in between – but you can be sure that you will eventually face these decisions when you strive to be a leader. My prayer for you and me is that we can face these situations as successfully as Nehemiah did. What were the last temptations that Nehemiah faced? There were three we'll look at today.

- 1. Letting others lure you off course.** ¹*"When word came to Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall and not a gap was left in it – though up to that time I had not set the doors in the gates –* ²*Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message: 'Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono.'* They were attempting to lure Nehemiah into putting the final stage of his project on hold while he dealt with their fabricated emergency. They invited Nehemiah to come visit them so that they could discuss their concerns. Nehemiah saw through it... ³*"But they were scheming to harm me; so I sent messengers to them with this reply: 'I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down...'"* Nehemiah refused to stop the work to go visit them, so THEY TRIED AGAIN. And again. And again. And yet again. Each time Nehemiah said his persistent, "No." He refused to allow himself to get off course. What was his purpose? HE HAD A WALL TO FINISH! It didn't matter how many times Sanballat and company begged and connived, Nehemiah wouldn't change his mind. Have you ever noticed how skilled some children are at getting their parents off course, and how effectively they can wear their parents down? They know that if they BEG long enough, WHINE long enough, POUT long enough, or HOLD THEIR BREATH long enough, EVENTUALLY their parents will relent and let them have their way. Every child tries this; effective parents learn early that if they want to maintain control of their household, the child must learn that "NO" means "NO." Now, I'm not intentionally comparing your child to Satan, but I want you to know that the devil tries the same thing with leaders. He comes at you again and again and again. He puts people in your path to beg and plead and demand and threaten in an attempt to wear you down and make you give in. He comes after you with the same situation, the same temptations, as if eventually you'll get tired of resisting. The enemy needs to learn – as do all who attempt to sidetrack you need to learn – that you WON'T give in, you WON'T back down, you WON'T get off course. Your enemies need to know that when you say "NO," you mean "NO" – the first time, the second time, the third time, and EVERY TIME! Every leader must deal with this temptation – where, under the guise of

friendliness, people try to steer you away from finishing the job that God has called you to do. Don't let yourself get sidetracked. Stay focused. Stay on target. Your response needs to be the same as Nehemiah's. He said... ³*"I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?"* Leaders need to remember what "wall" they are trying to build, and never lose sight of it. I'm thinking that there may be some churches struggling with this – especially during election season. We need to make sure we stay on topic. It's not our job to get people elected. It's not our job to advance someone's political career. What is our job? It's our job to win the lost. It's our job to make disciples. People will come at us from time to time who will say, "You need to focus on this problem," or "You need to deal with this issue," and maybe they mean well, but we cannot let anyone get us off track. We mustn't let someone else define what our mission is and how we are to go about completing it. Effective leaders don't let the Sanballats set their agenda. Effective leaders stay focused on the wall they are trying to build – ESPECIALLY when the end is in sight.

2. Trying to prove yourself with words rather than results. When Nehemiah refused to go down to Ono to meet Sanballat and company, they turned up the heat a little bit. They came back with some false accusations. Look at how they did it. ⁵*"Then, the fifth time, Sanballat sent his aide to me with the same message, and in his hand was an unsealed letter..."* What is the significance of the UNSEALED letter? ANYONE COULD READ ITS CONTENTS, and everyone could talk about it. Sanballat is pulling the same stunt here that he pulled in chapter four: He's trying to stir things up; He's trying to cause trouble. This is what he says to Nehemiah... ⁶*"It is reported among the nations – and Geshem says it is true – that you and the Jews are plotting to revolt, and therefore you are building the wall. Moreover, according to these reports you are about to become their king and have even appointed prophets to make this proclamation about you in Jerusalem: 'There is a king in Judah!' Now this report will get back to the king; so come, let us confer together."* Did you get that? He said, "Nehemiah, the word on the street is that you're trying to overthrow the government and set yourself up as ruler of Jerusalem. We're going to tell the king about your plans, so you better stop what you are doing and come talk to us." Remember – this was written in an open letter, so the messenger could read it and HE could talk about the contents of the letter to anyone who would listen. The idea was to get everyone talking about Nehemiah's plans and to get everyone worked up over what Nehemiah was doing; to get everyone in a state of panic. Nehemiah could have taken the time to make his case, to prove to Sanballat that the rumors weren't true. He could have argued his point. He could have engaged in a PR campaign to clear his name. What did he do instead? He said, basically, "You're making this stuff up and that's all there is to it." His exact words... ⁸*"I sent him this reply: 'Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head.'"* Nehemiah goes on to say... ⁹*"They were all trying to frighten us, thinking, 'Their hands will get too weak for the work, and it will not be completed.'"* The truth is that it's a little scary to have people talking about you, especially when they're telling lies. It's hard to stay focused on the task at hand when you know people are trying to sabotage your efforts. You want to respond. You want to defend yourself. BUT do you know what the best response is? Do you know what the BEST defense is? A FINISHED WALL. The best answer to rumors and accusations is to finish the work God has called you to do. Critics like to talk about what might happen. They like to get people alarmed. The sad reality is that sometimes people fall for it. Do you remember the Y2K scare? A lot of people made a lot of money getting people worked up over what turned out to be nothing. That's what alarmists like Sanballat like to do – anything to get God's people sidetracked. Anything to prevent the job from being completed. They'll say whatever they need to say, true or false, to keep people in a state of panic. To be EFFECTIVE leaders, we must learn to stay focused on the job at hand. We're not here to win debates. We're here to win the world to Christ. We're here to do a job – to see it through to completion. You prove yourself with RESULTS, not with words.

3. Taking the easy way out. ¹⁰*"One day I went to the house of Shemaiah son of Delaiah, the son of Mehetabel, who was shut in at his home. He said, 'Let us meet in the house of God, inside the temple, and let us close the temple doors, because men are coming to kill you – by night they are coming to kill you.'"* Here Nehemiah had a golden opportunity to give up. He could have bolted and no one would have blamed him. After all, people were out to kill him. You can't blame a man for wanting to stay alive, can you? Nehemiah could have said, "True, we didn't quite get the job done, but it was because I had to run for my life! If it weren't for the death threats, we would have finished the job." I think at some point most leaders are faced with this "opportunity" – or at least the DESIRE for this kind of opportunity. I'm talking about the chance to QUIT with honor. The chance to FAIL without losing face. The chance to have an EXCUSE – almost a legitimate excuse – for giving up. ILLUSTRATION: When Robert Schuller was struggling as a church planter in Garden Grove, California, long before the days of the

Crystal Cathedral, when he was working long hours and seeing few results, he is reported to have often prayed that God would give him a heart attack so that he could fail with some amount of dignity...so that he would have a good excuse for quitting. Every leader encounters this desire. I'm aware of a missionary to a world trouble spot who thought, "If I just had a problem with my visa, if for some reason I couldn't enter the country, then no one could 'blame' me for giving up." Many a church planter has given serious thought to backing out before that opening Sunday. Most churches who have been through a building program have come to this point as well – that moment when you're able to say, "We can cut our losses and run; no one will blame us." Except we will always have to live with the knowledge that the job didn't get done, the project didn't get completed, the ministry didn't get launched, lives didn't get changed – because we took the easy way out. I confess, in regards to the building next door, I was guilty of asking God a few times – "Why did you have us buy this old building?" Perhaps it was so that this past Monday night young people could come to a Young Life event and hear about Jesus – some for perhaps the first time! Perhaps, so the realtor we went through to buy the building could come last Sunday and give his heart to Jesus! What did Nehemiah say to this opportunity to take the easy way out? ¹¹*"Should a man like me run away? Or should one like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go!"* Nehemiah had a good excuse for quitting. He could have easily said, "Let someone else have this headache; let someone else come in and finish the job. I'M NOT WILLING TO DIE FOR A WALL." But he WAS willing to die for a "wall" – or, better said, what that wall represented: GOD'S CALL ON HIS LIFE. He wasn't willing to quit short of completing the task that God had given him to do, and fulfilling the dream that God had placed in his heart. He would NOT take the EASY WAY OUT! Leaders, there will likely come a time when you can quit without too much trouble. There may come a time when you can slip out the back door unnoticed. And when that time comes, it will look rather appealing. You need to decide NOW that when that time comes, you WON'T TAKE THE EASY WAY OUT. You need to decide NOW that you'll see your area of leadership through to completion, until you have done ALL that God has called you to do. That may be a few moments before you take your last breath here. Get busy! Do something for the Kingdom.

4. **Conclusion.** Many may offer flimsy EXCUSES to compromise, but no one can offer a good REASON to compromise. One of the last temptations a leader will face has to do with GETTING OFF COURSE. The enemy will send in your direction ANYTHING he can that might cause you to quit, or cause you to change direction, or cause you to put everything on hold while you deal with this emergency or that. Effective leaders stay focused on the task – especially in the final moments, when the end is in sight – and they don't let anything get them off track, especially in the final stages. Effective leaders deliver the final product. Nehemiah delivered a final product. How did this phase of Nehemiah's story end? ¹⁵*"So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days. When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done WITH THE HELP OF OUR GOD."* When your WORK is done, your WORK will speak for you – and it will attest to God's presence and help in your life. Until that day comes, KEEP WORKING. As we conclude this series in Nehemiah, I hope that you are more inspired today to be used by God. I hope that, like Nehemiah, God will give you a dream of what you can accomplish for His glory. I hope that you will go through the process of preparation, devoting yourself to prayer while seeking out the right opportunity to get started. I hope that you will inspire and motivate and recruit others to share your vision. Here's my HOPE FOR YOU: I hope you will have STRENGTH to IGNORE OPPOSITION and the WISDOM to SOLVE PROBLEMS along the way. AND I hope and pray that on the home stretch you will stay focused on the finish line, you will keep your eyes on the prize, so that you can fulfill God's call on your life. I pray that where you lead, you will walk in the power and presence and blessing of God.