

Nehemiah 6-7
Holy Focus
Feb 24, 2019

Great to be back with everyone! I've been getting a lot of correspondence from people in the church the last couple weeks. Calls and emails and letters. And surprisingly it's not about any leadership decisions that we're making! It's not about any sermons I've been preaching. People are just asking to see pictures of our son. I think most of the requests are coming from the older ladies in the church! To satisfy your requests - here's a picture of Hudson on his **first airplane ride last week**. Once we landed, we went straight to the hotel, and let's just say Hudson really **enjoyed the hotel**. He also likes to dress for games of **polo**, and he's often seen flexing his **muscles**. Thank you for sharing in our joy of welcoming Hudson into the world. Having the support and encouragement of this church family has meant so, so much to us!

As long as I'm showing you pictures, take a look at a couple of other photos I've taken recently. Here's one from a **party** I was at. Here's one from **downtown Indy**? Or how about this one, from my **living room**? Do you see the problem with those pictures? There's no focus. Focus makes all the difference! And it's not just photography.

Award winning director, James Cameron, was asked how he was able to create **Avatar** —what has been, by far and away, the highest grossing movie of all time. He said, “**I focused on it for four years.**”

Many of you will recognize **this man**. His name is Warren Buffet. He's colloquially referred to as the Oracle of Omaha and is widely considered to be the most successful investor in history. Every year, people bid millions of dollars just to be able to sit down and share a single lunch with him and pick his brain on investing. He began his career in **New York City**, and he said he couldn't stay there because of all the distractions. Museums, shows, celebrities, restaurants - stimuli everywhere. So he moved to the one place there wouldn't be any distractions at all: **Nebraska**! Seriously. He moved to Nebraska so he could have single minded focus on investing without any distractions. And from the ground up he built an investment firm worth well over **500 billion dollars**.

All this is converging to a point, and it happens to align with what we are studying in our passage of Nehemiah today. Turn with me to chapter 6. Here's the major lesson we are going to learn: **If we want to finish, we have to focus!** Say that with me.

Let me remind you of what has been happening in this book. Nehemiah was one of the leading officials in the Persian Empire. He has power and status and wealth and everything a man could want. But he learned about the needs of God's people in Jerusalem. The city was in shambles, the people were in disgrace; and because Jerusalem was the city of God, God's name was dishonored among all the people. Nehemiah knew deep down God was calling him to do something about it. So he went to the King and got a leave of absence, secured funding, traveled 1,000 miles, cast vision, recruited volunteers and, with the help of God, began to rebuild the city.

As we come to chapter 6, Nehemiah is nearing the completion of the wall. It's almost done. But before he can finish it, there is a last-ditch attempt by his enemies to try to thwart the project. They try to distract him in three different ways. Today, we are going to read through this passage and talk about the three types of distraction he faced and see how they might be relevant for our lives and our leadership, as well.

Let's look at 6:1-4 **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.” But they were scheming to harm me; 3 so I sent messengers to them with this reply: “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?” 4 Four times they sent me the same message, and each time I gave them the same answer.**

Did you see how close he is to finishing this project? All Nehemiah has left to do is set the doors in the gates. His enemies, Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem, knew this and conspired together to distract Nehemiah right as he was approaching the finish line. And they said to him, not once, not twice, not three times, but four times, “Take a break from what you're doing. I know what you're doing is important, and I know it really matters to you, but this is an opportunity you can't afford to pass up. Take a quick break and come over here and talk to us. Let's meet together. We have something really pressing to share with you.” Where did they want him to meet them? The plain of Ono, which was about 27 miles away and would have required Nehemiah to take several days off the job. And of course, they intended to harm him once he got there. They didn't tell him that! They said, “This is a great opportunity, so you don't want to miss out on this. Just give us a little bit of your time, Nehemiah. You won't regret it.”

The first distraction that Nehemiah encountered was **The distraction of “promising” opportunities.** Something that we see not only in Nehemiah and we confirmed again and again countless times in modern life: When you are seriously committed to the work that God has called you to, and you've worked hard and made great progress, before you can finish the project there will inevitably be a very “promising” opportunity that tries to divert your attention away from seeing what you started through to completion!

- You've made a goal to stay for at least five years at a company, you are four years in and guess what - a very distracting opportunity - you just got three unsolicited job offers
- You've made a personal commitment to take one year and not date anyone, just to focus on getting yourself in a healthy place. You're nine months in, making great progress, and guess what - here comes a distracting opportunity - someone who you think could be the one.
- You've made a goal to pay off your credit card debt by the end of this year, and you've made such great progress. And then, guess what? Here comes a very distracting opportunity. Vacation with your friends.

- You've made a goal to spend more time with your family. You're excited about it. You are committed to it. Then guess what - here's comes another business deal that was basically falls into your lap....and this one is going to be so lucrative. A very distracting opportunity.

Anytime you are seriously committed to seeing something significant accomplished, and you've made real progress, there is always going to be a "promising" opportunity that comes along that will keep you from completing it. And how many times is that "promising" opportunity going to present itself to draw you away? Once? Twice? Three times? No. Again and again and again and again there is going to be a distraction that promises to be worthwhile...but the promise is a lie! That promising opportunity is not going to help you, it's going to harm you! So what do you need to do? You need to memorize Nehemiah's words: **"I am doing a great work and I cannot come down."** **ESV Nehemiah 6:3** Put them in the ESV, I think they get this a little more accurately. Let's say this together. Let's say it again. I want us to memorize it. Let's take some of the words away and say it:

I am _____ a great _____ and I _____ come _____.

I am _____ a _____ and I _____.

_____.

I don't know what task God may have called you to in this season. He might be calling you to finish your education, or finish the last three sessions of marriage counseling. He might be calling you to stay at your job, or continue in your small group even though it's hard. I don't know what he is calling you to, but I do know this: every leader who has accomplished anything of significance has discovered you have to say "no" to the vast majority of opportunities you are presented with if you want to be able to legitimately say yes to the best things. Once you know what God has called you to do, all these "promising opportunities" are simply distractions that prevent it from happening. So what are we going to say when the distraction of promising opportunities come? "I am doing a great work and I cannot come down!" Let me tell you something I've learned. If people aren't questioning the intensity of your focus, you probably aren't focused enough!

I can tell you what this looks like for me: As someone who preaches and leads at a large church, I get requests all the time to visit other churches, go to this conference, speak here or there, go on this mission trip. All of those things matter greatly. I genuinely care about them deeply. I really do. But my top priority, after loving Jesus with all my heart, is to be a great husband to my wife, to be a great father to my new son, to be a present and engaged pastor at this church. Jesus, Keren, Hudson, this church. I have complete focus, in that order, on what I am supposed to do. That focus sets my priorities. So 99% of the time I am asked to do something, I say no. Not because I want to say "no," but so that I can say "yes" to what matters most. We can't afford to sacrifice our own walk with God on the altar of "promising opportunities." We can't afford to sacrifice our family on the altar of "promising opportunities." We can't afford to sacrifice our God-given mission on the altar of "promising opportunities." We have to stay focused. And we

would be wise to remember that the opportunities with the greatest potential to distract us will always be great opportunities. That is precisely the time you need to focus the most. Remember: **If we want to finish, we have to focus!**

So Nehemiah encounters the distraction of “promising” opportunities. Take a look at how the story continues: **5 Then, the fifth time, Sanballat sent his aide to me with the same message, and in his hand was an unsealed letter 6 in which was written: “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 7 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 meet together.”** After Nehemiah refuses to fall for the initial trap, the opposition moves from distraction to a smear campaign. Did you notice in 6:5 that the letter that was sent was specifically **unsealed**. If you have your bibles open, you want to underline or highlight that word. This was not the way official letters were circulated in the ancient world. Letters were written, and then sealed with wax, and then remained closed until the intended recipient opened them and they could confirm no one read their mail by making sure the seal wasn’t tampered with. This letter was intentionally left opened. So lots of people were reading the contents. This letter is full of fabrications, concocted schemes, accusing Nehemiah of leading some sort of rebellion against the king. This is where the term Fake News originated! Bold-faced slander. And it’s the sort of slander that, if it was believed by the wrong people, wouldn’t just get Nehemiah in a little bit of trouble, it would cost Nehemiah his life. Do you know what kings do when people in their court plot to rebel? Kings kill those people. This is the absolute most harmful and dangerous slander that could have possibly been spread about him.

This is **The distraction of malicious criticism**. And how does Nehemiah respond to it? Does he stop his work and spend a long time drafting a lengthy letter in reply, countering each point with evidence and irrefutable facts? Does he go to the local news station to get on the camera to set the record straight and expose the real motives of his opponents? Nope, he was too wise and strategic to get sucked into their game. This is all he says: **8 I sent him this reply: “Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head.”** A single sentence in English, just six words in the original Hebrew. All your accusations, all your slander, your malicious criticism... I’m going to say six words; it’s going to take about three seconds of my time to say them, and then guess what? I’m getting back to work. Why? Because I am doing a great work, and I cannot come down!

We see such an incredible principle at work here: **Instead of defending his reputation, Nehemiah simply lived with integrity and allowed God to bring him honor.** If you have ever had someone discredit you publicly—gossip about you and slander you, you know how hard this can be. My best guess is that you can remember a time when someone said something hurtful and inaccurate about you that was intended to discredit you.

- You’ve had a coworker tear you down.
- You’ve had an ex smear your name.
- You’ve had a family member make up lies and share them around.

- You've had someone in your friend circle who always looks for opportunities to jab you and make you look like a fool.

Let me ask, would you raise your hand if in the recent past, you feel like someone has unfairly shared inaccurate information about you??? Almost every one of us have been there. My hand is raised, too. When that happens, when people are sharing malicious criticism, what takes place inside of us? Everything inside of us wants to scream, "That's not true!" Everything within us wants to defend ourselves. We start having elaborate hypothetical conversations in our own minds. We find our friends who agree with us and we vent to them. We lose sleep. We spend hours and hours constructing counter narratives and plan how we can strategically share the "real story" so that the record is finally set straight and our innocence is established. Hearing words of malicious criticism about us typically has the power of a cosmic black hole. We feel the pull to get sucked in, which ultimately only ever leads to emotional disintegration.

And do you know what all of that ultimately accomplishes??? Nothing! All it does is pull you down to their level and distract you from the mission at hand. Like Nehemiah, let's become people who refuse to get pulled into the vortex of slander, "he said - she said," and simply live a life of integrity before God and allow God to establish our honor. Instead of responding to criticism and arguing with people, guess what we get to do instead? Focus on the work at hand. If we want to finish, we have to focus! **"You'll never reach your destination if you stop and throw stones at every dog that barks."** Winston Churchill

Take a look at how the story continues. **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."** So his ally is telling him, "These guys aren't playing games; they aren't just making empty threats. They want to kill you. You won't be any good to the community if you're dead. Let's spend a few days together in the temple. We'll close the doors, lock them, and double bolt them. We won't let those bad guys in. We'll keep you nice and safe so that no harm comes to you. At first that seems like a very reasonable idea, right? Survival is a basic human instinct. No one wants to die. So his friend is saying, "What's the harm in playing it safe for a few days?" But think, what ultimate effect would hiding in the temple for a few days result in? Nehemiah would be immobilized and the work he was committed to accomplishing would come to a complete halt. We go from the distraction of promising opportunities, to the distraction of malicious criticism to the third and final distraction: **The distraction of fear and insecurity.** Nehemiah was so wise and perceptive. Instead of being paralyzed by fear, look how he responded:

11 But I said, "Should a man like me run away? Or should someone like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go!" Again, in the Hebrew, just seven words. I'll pause for three seconds. I'll give you an answer. Then I'll ask you to leave me alone, so I can get on with my work.

The truth is that most of us don't have to face the threats to our life and well-being like Nehemiah. But we still face opposition that strikes directly at the fear and insecurity in our life.

When was the last time you were tempted to make a decision because of fear and insecurity? It happens to all of us.

- You want to ask her out, but then you hear this voice, “Why would someone that pretty ever go on a date with you?”
- You want to apply for that job, but then you hear this voice, “What would that company ever see in you?”
- You want to set a huge goal! But before you share it with anyone you hear that voice, “Don’t do it; it’s not worth it. If you fail, everyone will think you’re a loser and they’ll discover you’ve been a fraud this whole time.”

There are all these voices in our heads, and sometimes actual voices from people we know that are saying, “Just play it safe. Don’t take the risk. Just hide in here for a while.” What did Nehemiah do? He said: “Are you serious?! You think a person like me should run away and hide?” If Nehemiah could respond that way, so can you! You are loved so much Christ died for you. You have the power of the Holy Spirit living inside of you. “Why should a person like me run and hide? God has given us perfect love. And what does the Bible say about perfect love? Perfect love drives out fear.”

With every distraction that came, Nehemiah had laser-like focus. With the right amount of focus, you can take water or light, and make it so powerful it can cut steel. What if you had that kind of focus with your life? Where you knew exactly what God wanted you to do, and you said no to everything else! You resisted every other opportunity and ignored all the critics, dismissing fear and insecurity, and chasing after that mission with all your heart? Can you imagine what would happen?

Look at what happens for Nehemiah! **15 So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days.** Think about that! This city was destroyed on July 18, 586 BC. It was rebuilt here in early September 445. That’s 51,550 days. And how long did it take them to rebuild it? **52 days.** How did they do it? Not because God performed a miracle! Not because there was anything supernatural. It’s not like they prayed really hard, went to bed and the next day, boom, the Lord rebuilt the wall for them. No, this was brought about because one man had a clear sense of calling from God. He knew with great clarity what God wanted to bring about through his life, and he focused on it completely until it was brought about.

What does this look like for us? God is doing something great in our midst. He is bringing more and more people into a saving knowledge of him. He is helping more and more people grow as disciples. We are seeing more young people than ever connect to Christ and others at our church. God is doing a great work. But it’s not done. If we want to finish, we have to focus.