

Don't Vacillate – Perpetuate!

by Ray C. Stedman

Everyone is watching our new Administration, wondering what it can do about the many difficult problems we face in our day. Be praying for the President and the members of Congress because these problems are far beyond what natural wisdom can solve. Our leaders need God's help in dealing with the enormous debt that hangs over our heads; for the very delicate dealings on a somewhat new basis with the Soviet Union; on the way to handle the vicious traffic in drugs that is destroying so many lives; for the mounting moral crisis that we are facing over abortion; the rise of homosexuality as an acceptable lifestyle in our nation; the racial strife that seems always to be with us; and the terrible violence in our city streets. It is a situation which confronts us with enormous complexity.

We find a similar situation in the case of our friend Nehemiah, who was given the task of rebuilding the walls and gates of Jerusalem some 2,500 years ago. Yet in this ancient story there is help for us today in knowing how to solve the problems facing our nation. Here, too, we will find help in overcoming our individual problems as we seek to rebuild damaged areas of our lives, or to repair weak areas where we are easily invaded.

One thing that clearly emerges from this book is that life is a battle from beginning to end. Nehemiah ran into opposition the moment he set his heart to obey God's command to rebuild the walls and gates of Jerusalem. He faced difficulty before he even got to the city. Then, after he reached Jerusalem, enemies rose up to oppose everything he did. You may not yet have experienced all that in your Christian life, but you will! In Ephesians 6 the Apostle Paul warns, "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood," {Eph 6:12 NIV}. Men and women, other humans, are not really our problem. What we are up against is invisible forces: "the world powers of darkness" {cf, Eph 6:12b}, Paul calls them. These same enemies are found in

the book of Nehemiah also. Thus we are confronted by an invisible enemy who hates law and order, and justice and peace. He loves to mangle, trap, destroy and murder. He lives to oppose the work of God in creating harmony, beauty, love and respect. That is what we are battling.

Here in Nehemiah, as in many other places in Scripture, we learn that the devil has two main ways of working. I hope you will bear them strongly in mind because you will run into both of them in your experience, and perhaps have already done so:

1. First, the devil comes, as Peter says, "like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour," {1 Pet 5:8b RSV}. A lion is a very dangerous, powerful and fearsome animal. He is so strong that one bite from his jaws can crush the thickest bone in the human body, the thigh bone. One blow from his mighty paw can smash a human skull like an egg shell. This strength portrays the devil's ability to strike at us with calamity, disaster and frightening circumstances that chill our blood. That is one way the enemy works in our lives.
2. But he has another capacity also. The Bible reveals that he can suddenly become what the Scripture calls "an angel of light," {2 Cor 11:14b}. He comes with smiling, gracious accommodation, enticing promises and flattering words, assuring us that what he proposes will cost us nothing.

But either route, fear or flattery, will result in destruction for us. Ruin will begin. We must be on our guard against each of these approaches. That is why Paul says of himself, "We are not ignorant of the devil's devices," {cf, 2 Cor 2:11 KJV}. Nehemiah likewise teaches us to be aware of how the devil goes about his work.

In Chapter 6, following a series of attacks and threats against him in an effort to intimidate him, the enemies of Nehemiah suddenly change their tactics. Suddenly they resort to friendliness and persuasion.

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 – 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; 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?” Four times they sent me the same message, and each time I gave them the same answer. {Neh 6:1-4 NIV}

They could not stop the work of building by threat and attack, so they switched their tactics. You will experience this too when you try to correct wrong things in your life. It is possible that your friends will become your most dangerous foes. Many people today are faltering in their Christian pilgrimage because they listen to the advice of their friends. But those friends may not be reflecting the wisdom of God. They may be picking up the attitudes and wisdom of the world around. It sounds like good advice because so many people follow it, but it may be totally wrong. We must check everything by the word and wisdom of the Scriptures.

These erstwhile enemies suddenly become Nehemiah's friends and invite him to a conference down on the plain of Ono. It is located near where the airport is in Israel now, down on the seacoast near the Gaza strip. As we have already seen, this was the home of some of the enemies of Nehemiah. But Nehemiah senses danger: “they were scheming to harm me,” he says. Some commentators suggest that they were trying to trick him into leaving Jerusalem, where he had armed support, to come to a conference where they could set upon him and perhaps kill him. Nehemiah evidently senses this. He firmly declines, saying, “I am carrying on a great project, and I cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?”

That is a great answer. We need especially to note the reasons he gives. On the surface it seems a surly response to their invitation to meet together. It sounds brusque and blunt. But Nehemiah sees through their scheme and refuses to go along, even though they pressure him four different times.

You, too, may experience continuing pressure to change your mind and go along with something that is wrong. Many have fallen after a proper refusal, simply because they gave in to repeated pressure.

But Nehemiah persists in his refusal. Here is his reason: “I am doing a great work,” he says. “I have a great calling. God has committed a tremendous project to me, and if I leave, it will be threatened.”

One of the most helpful things that we can do to resist temptation is to remember that God has called us to a great task. This is true of every believer in Christ. I do not care how young or how old you are in the Lord, you are called to a tremendous work today. That task is: to model a different lifestyle so that those who are being ruined by wrongful practices will see something that offers them hope and deliverance. If they see in you peace in the midst of confusion, an invisible support that keeps you steady and firm under pressure, they will learn that there is another way to live than the destructive way they have chosen. That is the great work that God has called us to. We ought never to give allegiance to anything less.

I read years ago of a missionary in China, a very capable young man who did a great job as a linguist and a diplomat in his work for the Lord. His abilities were so outstanding that one of the American companies in China tried to hire him. They offered him an attractive job with a salary to match, but he turned them down. He told them that God had sent him to China as a missionary and that was what he was going to do. He thought that would end the matter, but instead they came back with a better offer and an increase in salary. He turned that down too, but again they came back, doubling the salary that had originally been proposed. Finally he said to them, “It is not your salary that is too little. It's the job that's too small!”

This is essentially what Nehemiah is saying here. He has a great work, and he is not going to forsake it for anything less.

I ran across a great word along these lines from Dr. F. B. Meyer, a great Bible teacher earlier this century:

Oh, children of the Great King, let us pray that we may know the grandeur of our position before him, the high calling with which we have been called, the vast responsibilities with which we are entrusted, the great work of cooperating with God in erecting the city of God. Heirs of God, joint-heirs with Christ, called to sit with Christ in the heavenlies, risen, ascended, crowned in Him, sitting with Christ far above all principality and power. How can we go down – down to the world that rejected him, down to the level of the first Adam from which at so great cost we have been raised, down to the quarry from which we were hewn and the hole of the pit whence we were digged? No, it cannot be.

Surely that captures something of the spirit Nehemiah displays. He is confronted with an offer that seems to promise peace and support, and yet is filled with danger which he successfully avoids by refusing to leave his calling.

When the enemy cannot accomplish his purpose by offering peace and friendliness, he switches back to his original tactic of threats and danger.

Then, the fifth time, Sanballat sent his aide to me with the same message [i.e., to come down and confer], and in his hand was an unsealed letter in which was written:

“It is reported among the nations – and Geshem [the Arab] 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.” {Neh 6:5-7 NIV}

This arm-twisting tactic is designed to put pressure on Nehemiah to yield to their solicitation, and thus fall into their trap. But he resists because he sees it for what it really is, an enticement based upon lies and without basis in any fact whatsoever. He responds with a simple denial.

I am reminded of the anonymous letters that pastors sometimes get in the mail. On occasion I have been on the receiving end of unsigned letters taking me to task or complaining about some matter. My practice through the years has been to throw such letters in the waste basket. If people will not sign their name there is no use in paying attention to what they have to say. Such letters are the work of cowards, or, perhaps, fools.

I heard once of a man who was addressing an audience and someone sent a piece of paper up to him with the word “Fool” written on it. He said to the audience, “I have received many unsigned messages in the past, but this is the first time I have ever received one from a man who signed his name but wrote no message!” Perhaps that is the proper way to respond to something like this.

Note that it was an “unsealed letter.” In other words, it was designed for everybody involved in delivering it to read, and thus spread around the lie that Nehemiah was trying to make himself king. Notice how he responds.

I sent him this reply: “nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head.” {Neh 6:8 NIV}

That is the way to respond to such a charge – just a flat denial. There is no attempt to disprove their accusation. He merely states, “That is a lie. There is no truth in it.” And then, invariably, his response is one of prayer.

They are all trying to frighten us, thinking, “Their hands will get too weak for the work, and it will not be completed.” But I prayed, “Now strengthen my hands.” {Neh 6:9 NIV}

Their tactics were to get the people to think that Nehemiah had some hidden motive – his own glory – for rebuilding the wall, hoping that the workers would thus become discouraged and quit. Nehemiah simply prays, “Lord, do not let that happen. Strengthen me to work all the harder.” This great response will help us if we are charged with some kind of slanderous lie like this.

Once again the enemy switches his tactics. He reverts again to subterfuge:

One day I went to the house of She-maiah 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.” {Neh 6:10 NIV}

This word comes in the form of a prophecy, but this man is a false prophet. He claims to have hidden, perhaps occult, knowledge. That is suggested here by this word that he was “shut in” at his home. That does not mean that he was sick; it rather suggests that for some religious reason he was secluding himself. This is frequently the case with those who claim to be seers and in touch with the invisible world. They sit behind curtains in semi-darkness, trying to create a sense of mystery, as though they know more about inscrutable things than others.

What he says sounds logical. “Some people are out to get you. They are going to kill you,” he charges. Nehemiah certainly believes that! The man suggests, “Come on up here and we will go into the temple and shut the doors. They will not dare attack you there.” That sounds good, but immediately Nehemiah detects something wrong. He knows that he is not permitted to go into the temple, for only priests could enter the temple, and he was a layman. There is nothing wrong with being a layman, but it was simply not right for him to do this. So he answers:

But I said, “Should a man like me run away? Or should one like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go!” {Neh 6:11 NIV}

He realizes that a prophet who was really from the Lord would say nothing not in line with the commands of God, or contrary to them. There was an altar of asylum in the temple courtyard to which people who were under threat could flee and be safe, but this man is proposing they actually go into the temple and shut the doors. So Nehemiah says:

I realized that God had not sent him, but that he had prophesied against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. He had been hired to intimidate me so that I would commit a sin by doing this, and then

they would give me a bad name to discredit me. {Neh 6:12-13 NIV}

It was all part of a plan to discourage the people from following Nehemiah’s lead. Fueled by jealousy and ambition, these enemies slandered him and tried to trick him into yielding to their demands.

We must be aware of this kind of attack in our lives in these days. Do not take everyone’s advice just because they are friendly to you. It may be totally wrong advice. Nothing substitutes for a knowledge of the Word of God. That is how you can detect error and tell what is wrong. The best response to such an approach is what Nehemiah uses here – a deep sense of his true identity as a believer. “Should a man like me run and hide and try to save his life by wrong approaches and unlawful practices?” He falls back upon his clear consciousness of who he is. He is a believer in the Living God and as such need not resort to trickery to save his life.

This is exactly what the New Testament calls us to as well. Writing to the Thessalonians, faced with the normal pressures and problems of life, the Apostle Paul’s word is, “Walk worthy of God,” {cf, 1 Th 2:12 KJV}. We are called to walk with God:

- You are a child of his.
- You belong to him.
- You are therefore living at a different level than those around you.

If you remember who you are, you will not go along with these wrong things that people are being pressured into today.

Henry David Thoreau wrote in *Walden Pond*, “If I seem not to keep step with others, it is because I am listening to another drum beat.” A Christian also listens to another drum beat. He is following his Lord, not the voices he hears around him. Nothing will free us more from the subtle pressures and temptations of today than to remember who we are.

This is Nehemiah’s wise response. And, of course, he prays also.

Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God, because of what they have done; remember also that prophetess Noadiah [We are not told what she did or said, but

she is evidently one of the false prophets here.], **and the rest of the prophets who have been trying to intimidate me.** {Neh 6:14 NIV}

Again Nehemiah relies upon the invisible hand of God, upon guidance from the Spirit.

Nothing will help us more in our pilgrimage through life than to remember that the Word of God and the Spirit of God are given to us to guide us through the difficulties that come our way:

- Are you utilizing these resources?
- They are available to us just as they were to Nehemiah.
- We can be as successful as he was if we employ them.

This brings us to the end of this first phase of Nehemiah's work.

So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days. When all our enemies heard about this and all the surrounding nations saw it, our enemies lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God. {Neh 6:15-16 NIV}

Even their enemies had to admit that God was at work in these people's lives. He was what accounted for their amazing success. This entire project was finished in just 52 days! Nehemiah had left Persia in April and it took him several months to journey to Jerusalem. Yet on October 2nd in the year 445 B.C. the wall was completed. They finished the work in 52 days because they put their minds and their shoulders to the task, and looked to God for wisdom and power to achieve. "When our enemies heard about this, they lost their self-confidence and they realized that they were battling against God himself," says Nehemiah.

What a beautiful picture of the power of Christian witness in a community! Even their enemies must agree that God is at work among them.

But the enemies are still not through. In these closing verses we see how they continue their tactics of opposition.

Also, in those days the nobles of Judah were sending many letters to Tobiah, and replies from Tobiah kept coming to them. For many in Judah were under oath to him, since he was son-in-law to Shecaniah son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam son of Berekiah. {Neh 6:17-18 NIV}

That is simply saying that Tobiah had inter-married with the Israelites. Taking advantage of that relationship, he was seeking to undermine Nehemiah's influence by nothing more than mere gossip. As Nehemiah says,

Moreover, they kept reporting to me his good deeds and then telling him what I said. And Tobiah sent letters to intimidate me. {Neh 6:19 NIV}

The truth that this conveys to us is that the devil never quits. He is never going to give up while we are still alive. I have been living now for some 71 years and I have to tell you the battle is just as intense, sometimes more so, than it ever was. I do not expect it to stop until the Lord calls me to glory because that is the nature of life.

God has wonderful blessings and much encouragement and joy for us along the way, but we must never cease battling against the world, the flesh and the devil until we get home. Do not expect your retirement days to be without difficulty or struggle. That is what the world seeks. That is their confused and distorted view of life. But it is not ours. The enemies will never quit. If they cannot undermine us with fear and flattery, they will try gossip and false rumors. This is what Nehemiah demonstrates for us.

We come now to Chapter 7, which is the longest chapter in the book. (We are not going to read it, so don't panic!) Here Nehemiah seeks to perpetuate the achievements that he has brought about, by appointing wise successors and establishing sound policies.

After the wall had been rebuilt and I had set the doors in place, the gatekeepers and the singers and the Levites were appointed. I put in charge of Jerusalem my brother Hanani, along with Hananiah the commander of the citadel, because he was a man of integrity and feared God more than

most men do. I said to them, “The gates of Jerusalem are not to be opened until the sun is hot. While the gatekeepers are still on duty, have them shut the doors and bar them. Also appoint residents of Jerusalem as guards, some at their posts and some near their own houses.” {Neh 7:1-3 NIV}

Though the wall was now finished, Nehemiah did not cease taking precautions. He realized that they were still subject to attack, and rather than open the gates at dawn, as most cities did, he directs, “Do not open them until the sun is hot.” This would preclude any possibility of a surprise attack while the people were still sleeping. He appoints residents to stand guard at the vulnerable points of the city wall.

This is teaching us that we must never let down our guard. How many men of prominence in the Christian life have we seen fall in their later years because they let down their guard and ceased to do battle with the enemy!

The rest of the chapter is given over to preserving the purity of the doctrine that God has taught, and the commitment of the Jews to the cause. It was necessary to ensure that only true Israelites lived within Jerusalem.

Now the city was large and spacious, but there were few people in it, and the houses had not yet been rebuilt. So my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles, the officials and the common people for registration by families. I found the genealogical record of those who had been the first to return. This is what I found written there: {Neh 7:4-5 NIV}

There follows a list of names of all the families of those who came back from Persia to Jerusalem under the leadership of Ezra, some thirty years before the time of Nehemiah. These, of course, were among the ones who helped him build the wall. He is not only giving credit to them but is also recognizing that they will be responsible to carry on what he has begun. So having appointed leaders who would succeed him, men of integrity, courage and faithfulness, he now sees to it that their followers are also true Israelites.

From Verse 6 through Verse 60 we have a list of the families of those who were able to prove their ancestry.

The spiritual application of that is that we need to know that we really belong to God:

- You will never be a successful servant of Christ,
- nor ever faithfully work for him and serve him,
- until you are assured that you know him and belong to him.

This is not only necessary for leaders but for the common people as well. We all need to know our spiritual pedigree, otherwise our service will be weak and largely ineffective.

Verse 61 lists some who could not prove their ancestry:

The following came up from the towns of Tel Melah, Tel Harsha, Kerub, Addon and Immer [these are cities in Persia], but they could not show that their families were descended from Israel. {Neh 7:61 NIV}

They were therefore not permitted to live in the city of Jerusalem for they had uncertain ancestry. Then he moves to the leaders, in Verse 63:

And from among the priests: the descendants of Hobaiah, Hakkoz and Barzillai (a man who had married a daughter of Barzillai the Gileadite and was called by that name). These searched for their family records, but they could not find them and so were excluded from the priesthood as unclean. The governor, therefore, ordered them not to eat any of the most sacred food until there should be a priest ministering with the Urim and Thummim. {Neh 7:63-65 NIV}

Certain ones among the priests were denied the right to minister because they could not prove their ancestry.

Many try to minister in the church of God today who are uncertain that they belong to God. I run into pastors, seminary professors, and leaders in the Christian community who do not themselves know that they are true Christians. These always wreak havoc in the churches they seek to serve.

The reference to the Urim and Thummim is interesting. These were two stones (their names mean “Lights” and “Perfections”) which the high priest wore on his garment by which he could find

the mind of God. No one really knows how they worked. Nehemiah says these suspect priests are not allowed to minister “until a high priest arrives who has the Urim and Thummim.” I think this is a hidden reference to our Lord Jesus. In the book of Hebrews, Jesus is said to be “a priest after the order of Melchizedek” {Heb 6:6 KJV}, i.e. one who lives forever and who fully knows the mind of God. He can restore a suspect priest to a place of assurance in his ministry and give him back his office. We have seen such things happen on occasion.

The closing verses of the chapter give the number of people who returned to Jerusalem. Then there follows an account of a great offering that was taken for the rebuilding of the walls; and finally, a note on how the suburbs of the city were settled.

As we draw this to a close let us remember again the factors that enabled Nehemiah to stand against the pressures and temptations of his day. These are the same factors that will enable us to stand today:

- First, he had a great awareness of the magnitude of the task that God had given him to do. He had a ministry to perform, and a lifestyle to model for others. He never forgot that God had sent him to Jerusalem to work and demonstrate to people how to live. That held him steady when there were pressures against him.

- Then, second, he never forgot his own identity. He knew who he was. He knew he belonged to God and that he was part of his people.
- Third, he was free from the influence of others. He refused to listen to every bit of advice that came along. He refused counsel from those who did not have access to the mind and wisdom of God.
- And then, fourth, in a very common sense way he was careful to put into practice what he knew. How practical was this man! He sets up guards, assigns responsibilities, shares the labor, and investigates carefully. That is a great factor in his success.
- Finally, fifth, above all else, he prays. He subjected everything to the wisdom of God.

One of the most helpful Scriptures that has guided me throughout my life is one I learned as a young man: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not to your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him and he will direct your paths,” {cf, Proverbs 3:5-6 KJV}.

Do you want God directing your life?

Then begin to do these simple things.