

WHY WON'T THEY LEAVE ME ALONE?

“Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution” [2 Tim. 3:12]

In English folklore, there is the story of a hungry lion that went to a brook where he normally found much game. There, he saw a lamb lapping water at the other end of the stream. The following dialogue followed:

Lion [roaring angrily]: *Why are you polluting my drink?*

Lamb [frightened]: *Sir, the water is flowing from your end.*

Lion: *Shut up! Your father called me a thief yesterday.*

Lamb: *It can't be, Sir. You killed my father last week.*

Lion [more angry now]: *It must be your mother.*

Lamb [more frightened, too!]: *My mother died last year.*

Lion: *It must be your relatives.*

Lamb: *I am an orphan.*

Lion: *I don't care!*

The lion pounced on the helpless innocent lamb and killed him for snacks.

Most of us pass through a similar experience every day for “our adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour” [1 Pet. 5:8]. It appears that some people have specialized in making our lives miserable for no just cause, and they seem to be enjoying it! Family members, in-laws, bosses, teachers, church leaders, the media, professed enemies, best friends, etc. The list is endless. Yet, when you examine yourself, you can't pinpoint what you have done wrong. When you stay away, trouble! When you come near, more trouble! So, what can you do?

*I have good news for you: **we have the Lion of Judah on our side [Rev. 5:5]** and “if they have called the Master of the house Beelzebub, how much more shall they call them of His household?” [Matt. 10:25]. Moreover, “all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution” [2Tim. 3:12]. So, if attacks from our detractors are inevitable, we had better learn how to handle them for our own good.*

In today's lesson, we shall study how Nehemiah succeeded in completing the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, and learn a few tricks for ourselves. Before that, it is necessary to rule out self-inflicted injury. Otherwise, we shall be like the young man accused of murdering his parents. As an outraged community called for his head, he complained that nobody seemed to sympathize with him, a lonely orphan!

1. Why are they after me?

There are three versions of every story: mine, yours and the truth! Let's see how people could be after us from the three perspectives.

(a) I am responsible

“Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap” [Gal. 6:7]. So, if others are against you, why not first examine yourself?

When you spray perfumes or any sweet smelling substance against the wind, I am sure that you will spread yourself out to enjoy what comes back at you. But, if you throw dirt or filth, you are likely to back away, if not run, screaming that your enemies are pursuing you! Our relationships with others or with God can be like that. David murdered Uriah and married his wife. The sword never departed from David's household [2 Sam. 12: 9-12]. Esau hated his brother, Jacob, for stealing his birthright [Gen. 27:41]. When we don't forgive those who have hurt us, we can't expect forgiveness from God or others. That is why Jesus has said that your offering (including prayers, of course) is unacceptable to God until you have reconciled with your neighbour [Matt. 5:23-24]. Otherwise, we should not complain if we are attacked or persecuted in such circumstances.

(b) They are responsible

On many occasions, we have wronged nobody. We may actually have done them good and they are rewarding us with persecution. For example, twice, David had the chance to kill Saul who was looking for David to kill. On each occasion, David spared his life but that did not stop the king from still pursuing him [1 Sam. 24: 17-19; 1 Sam. 26:21].

In most cases, our success is our problem with others. Resentment against another person's success is called *envy* [Eccl. 4:4]. Satan has always envied God's preeminent position, which led to his rebellion in heaven. Therefore, right from the Garden of Eden, he has also envied the position that God gave to man by making him in His image and likeness. Since then, Satan has made war on those who “keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ” [Rev. 12:17]. Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt out of envy of his special place in their family [Gen. 37:3-4, 11]. Aaron and Miriam, the brother and sister respectively of Moses, hated their brother because of his spiritual superiority over them [Num. 12:1-2]. Peter envied John's special relationship with Jesus Christ [Jn 21: 20-22]. Your position in the office or society or church, your intellectual endowments or educational achievements, etc., all these are the sources of human envy. A family friend once told my wife that her husband's people once came to their home to ask her and her husband why they never

brought their quarrels for the extended family to settle. In other words, they envied their happy marriage and hated them for it!

The true believer is in a unique position. Through the atoning death of Jesus on the Cross, you have received salvation by **grace**, not by works [**Gal. 2:16**]. In addition, earthly treasures with peace of mind and joy of the Holy Spirit are yours for the asking. These are benefits that are highly coveted by money or any other value system but which they can neither promise nor deliver. You are so sure-footed in your walk because you do so by faith and not by sight. How do you expect to be liked with all such privileges?

(c) The true reason

It may not be due to our fault or others' envy that we are perpetually under attack. The true reason may be that God is using us as bait to catch Satan and his devilish forces! A fisherman puts a little worm at the end of his hook and puts the hook inside the water. A fish sees the worm as food and rushes to eat it. In the process, he may succeed in eating the worm but the fisherman catches him. God is the fisherman; we are that helpless worm. Like us, the worm may be wondering what it has done wrong against the shoal of fish that keep rushing at it. It may wonder why it should be facing cold weather, painfully impaled to a hook. It may pray for relief from all those "persecutions" and nothing may come but death.

The same God who sent Moses to Pharaoh to free the Israelites was the same One who hardened Pharaoh's heart so that "I will stretch out My hand and smite Egypt with all My wonders which I will do in the midst thereof; and after that he will let you go" [**Ex. 3:20**]. Look at Job in the hands of Satan. God told Lucifer, "behold he is in thine hand, but save his life" [**Job 2:6**]. Job indeed lost everything except his life, and neither sin nor envy could explain it! So, stop crying! Instead, "blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceeding glad for great is your reward in heaven" [**Matt. 5:11-12**]. You have to die first before you can receive that promised reward!

In practice, we cannot separate one reason from the other and it does not matter. Once you are sure that you are in the will of God, expect fireworks from the enemy. Let us study Nehemiah's story to make our understanding of the subject clearer.

2. **Nehemiah rebuilds the walls of Jerusalem**

(a) Background

The bulk of the Jewish people were on exile in Babylon. Artaxerxes was on the Persian throne and Nehemiah, a Jewish exile, was his cup -bearer. Visitors to Jerusalem, God's own eternal city, had brought word that the walls had broken

down and that the gates had been burnt with fire, and that the remnant Jews there were “in great affliction and reproach” [Neh. 1:3].

Nehemiah fasted and prayed that God should grant him mercy in the sight of the king to obtain his permission to go back to Jerusalem to rebuild its walls [Neh. 1:4, 11]. His request was not only granted but the king also sent letters to the Western governors to convey him over their territories, and to Asaph, “the keeper of the king’s forest” to supply timber for the work. The king also gave Nehemiah “Federal guards” (mounted troops) to give effect to his orders [Neh. 2:7-8]. No sooner had he and his team arrived than hell let loose its forces to prevent God’s purpose from being carried out.

The three leading enemies were [Neh. 2:19] Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah, his servant, an Ammonite (i.e., a descendant of Lot, Abraham’s nephew), and Geshem the Arabian (i.e., a descendant of Ishmael, Isaac’s half-brother). They were not far from family, for as the word of God has said, “a man’s foes shall be they of his own household” [Mic. 7:6; Matt. 10:36]. What was their grievance against Nehemiah? “It grieved them exceedingly that there was come a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel” [Neh. 2:10]. That is exactly Satan’s attitude to us: to make war with those who “keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ” [Rev. 12:17]. So, this is more than a story of envy. God is going to use Nehemiah as bait to defeat Satan and his forces that are defiling the City of Zion, Jerusalem.

(b) The enemies roll out the tanks

The enemies employed a succession of tactics all based on the objective of preventing the walls from being built. The people of God, on the other hand, focussed on their God-given assignment to complete the reconstruction on schedule. Here is the sequence of events:

I. *Use of ridicule* [Neh. 4:1-6]

Sanballat ridiculed the effort of the wall builders by saying, “if a fox go up, he shall even break down their stone wall” [v. 3]. The enemy will always find a ridiculous explanation for your success. If a woman is promoted by merit out of God’s favours, it is because she compromised her moral values. If a husband and wife are deeply in love with each other, one has administered a love potion to the other! Like Nehemiah, we can dismiss such ridicule by remaining dedicated to the job on hand ‘for the people had a mind to work’ [v.6].

II. *Threat of physical attack* [vv. 7-9]

When ridicule could not stop the work, the enemies conspired to come to Jerusalem to hinder the work [v.8]. Nehemiah prayed to God and set a

watch against the enemies “day and night’ [v.9]. You cannot set a trap for a bird that is watching you [Prov. 1:17]. Jesus warned His disciples, “watch and pray that ye enter not into temptation” [Matt. 26:41]. Don’t let your detractors catch you unprepared for battle.

III. *Use of discouragement* [vv. 10-23]

The enemies persisted with discouraging stories. Ten times, they passed on the word that the workers were already worn out while there was still much work to do. Therefore, in the event of the planned attack, the builders would be too weak to see it coming! [vv. 10-12]

Those who will bring you rumours of your enemies’ strength will never take back to them your own preparedness. The aim is to frighten and discourage you. But not Nehemiah. The builders held a weapon on one hand and worked with the other [v. 17]. They refused to change their clothes or send them for washing. They believed that their God would fight for them [vv. 20, 23]. So, with the shield of faith on your left and the sword of the Spirit [the Word of God] on your right, you can remain strong as a labourer in the Lord’s vineyard.

IV. *Extortion* [Neh. 5:1-13]

The enemies tightened the noose around the builders by instigating an economic crisis among the local Jewish community that already carried a heavy debt burden. They insisted that the feeding and maintenance of the builders be charged to the people since the work was for their welfare. At the same time, they raised the interest rates on current loans, which the destitute people could not afford, having earlier forfeited their lands and vineyards to heathen creditors [vv. 1-7].

Again, Nehemiah was undaunted. Artaxerxes had made him governor over Judah for 12 years. Unlike his predecessors, he refused to take any emoluments. Instead, he brought over 150 Jews and rulers and the leaders of the heathen community to share table with him at his own cost. That way, they also did not need to charge their maintenance to the impoverished people [vv. 14-18]. The momentum of the work was maintained.

V. *By compromise* [6:1-4]

The enemies thought to lure Nehemiah out of his stronghold by inviting him to a meeting in one of the nearby villages possibly to buy him off the project [v.2]. Four times they implored him and each time he turned down their offer, insisting that he had no time to waste [v. 3].

Don't be deceived! When your enemies invite you to a meeting *on their own terms*, you are being asked to compromise your values and goals. After all, "what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? For ye are the temple of the living God" [2 Cor. 6:16].

VI. *Slander* [Neh. 6:5-9]

Five times, Sanballat and his cohorts wrote to invite Nehemiah to defend himself against charges of treason. They spread the word far and wide in the Persian Empire that Nehemiah's aim was to set up an independent kingdom of Judah, to the detriment of the Babylonian authorities [vv. 5-7]. Of course, if Nehemiah were to reply in writing, he would implicate himself because Jewish people believed that they were the children of the Kingdom of God [Dan. 3:16-18]. So, he simply waved them aside saying, "thou feignest them out of thine own heart" [v.8]. He prayed for God to strengthen his hands, and the plan failed! [v.9]

VII. *Treachery* [6:10-14]

"If they claim to be God-fearing, let us use their prophets and prophetesses (on our side) to deliver false messages to them. They should flee into the temple and shut the doors so that they won't be killed. Actually, our plan is to make them easy targets for destruction!" That was the next plan concocted by Sanballat and company. They used prophetess Noadah and her colleagues to give the "spiritual message" to Nehemiah. But, relying on the Holy Spirit, Nehemiah "perceived that God had not sent them but that he [prophet] pronounced this prophecy against me, for Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him" [v. 12]. Don't be deceived. Pay attention to the message, not the medium.

VIII. *SUCCESS in spite of all odds* [6:15-16]

In spite of all that the enemies did, the walls were rebuilt. "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*" [Neh. 6:16].

Your success is no joy to your enemies. Rather, it merely fuels their envy to prepare for another tournament!

3. Conclusion: Lessons learned

Nehemiah's success was not based on his personal prowess. Instead, he relied on God all the way by prayer, fasting, leadership example and hard work. Therefore, we can conclude as follows:

- (a) *If you believe that you are responsible for the attacks on you, seek reconciliation, for “if it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men” [Rom. 12:18];*
- (b) *Your success as a true believer makes you a sure target of envy. Therefore, if you are the subject of envy, behave humbly and wisely. After David had killed Goliath, he aroused envy among the troops and King Saul. However, “David behaved wisely in all his ways and the Lord was with him. Wherefore, when Saul saw that he behaved wisely, he was afraid of him. But all Israel and Judah loved David, because he went out and came in before them” [1 Sam. 18:14-16]. Use your material and spiritual success to help others, especially the less privileged [Lk 14:12-14];*
- (c) *Where God has chosen to use you as bait or a pawn in His battles with Satan, count it all joy, “knowing this that the trying of your faith worketh patience” [Jam. 1:2-3]. Many may be your afflictions but the Lord will deliver you out of them all [Ps. 34; 19].*

Success is sweet but the road to it is perpetually under construction! They will never leave you alone unless, of course, you no longer want to remain a true believer. May God forbid that kind of thought!