

**Nehemiah 6:1-19<sup>1</sup>**  
***The Joy of Completion***

**Introduction**

ILLUSTRATION: Some of you watched the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics on 8 Aug 2008. You were probably impressed by the grandiose, colour, choreography, lights, technology, pyrotechnics, and the precision that were displayed that evening. The highlight of the occasion was when the last runner of the torch relay, Li Ning (an Olympic gold medallist himself), was lifted up into the air and ran in midair for a distance, stopped and lighted a fuse that eventually set alight the Olympic Games flame.

Indeed, the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony was the culmination of past few years of hard preparation in a nation-wide effort on the part of the Chinese people to showcase and sell their country to the world. The end of the dazzling and extravagant ceremony was the completion of a great attempt to impress.

Of course, every great achievement comes with a price. The financial costs of building the infrastructure to host the Olympics are humongous (about US\$40 billion). The number of people mobilized not only for the opening ceremony, but also for the many days of competition is massive. Also, the way in which the torch relays in some countries had been disrupted by protesters against the Chinese government's handling of Tibet was a political price that China had to deal with.

I have titled my message based on Nehemiah 6 as "The Joy of Completion". Let me read for us vv. 15-16:

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.

What a joyous ending and achievement. But as if to tell us that this great joy of completion does carry with it a great price, the rest of Neh 6 actually paints a very gloomy picture of what was happening. Of all the 19 verses in Neh 6, only two verses (i.e. vv. 15 & 16) are "victorious" verses. The others are filled with intimidation, false prophecy and gossips. It is as if the writer wants to let us know that the joy of completion in vv. 15-16 must be read, understood and appreciated in the context of all these difficulties. The writer does not want us to be ignorant of the price the Jews, especially Nehemiah, had to pay for

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<sup>1</sup> 1984 NIV

succeeding in rebuilding the wall. The enemy had attempted to generate fear in the heart of Nehemiah and his workers on several occasions.

To lead us to the joy of completion in what He has for us to do, the Lord often leads us through a journey of spiritual growth.

**I. One aspect of this growth is in our conviction to fear God and not be strayed away.**

Knowing that the wall was already up except that the doors of the gates were not installed, the enemy pretended to be friendly and cooperative.

Those who had opposed the Jews now offered to meet Nehemiah in a village halfway between Jerusalem and Samaria, a quiet place where they could make plans on how to work together. "We're willing to meet you halfway. Let's cooperate."

While cooperation in the Lord's work is a noble thing, we must take care that we cooperate with the right people at the right time for the right purpose. When I say right people, I don't mean perfect humans. I mean people who must at least have the fundamental quality of fear of God, and dare not bring disrepute to the Lord's Name, the Lord's work, and the Lord's church. If we do not have a reverential fear of God, the evil one can actually capitalize on our passionate pursuits for his own evil purpose.

Nehemiah rejected the invitation to meet up with the enemy. He knew they were scheming to harm him (v. 2). But he rejected not because he feared them, but he feared God. His reply of rejection was in v. 3:

"I am carrying a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?"

Four times he rejected the enemy's invitation with the same reply. He was convinced of the greatness of the work God had given him to do. He feared God rather for his life. He dared not abandon his God-given post lest he brought disrepute to the Lord's Name and His work.

ILLUSTRATION: I know of a minister of the Gospel once greatly used by God. He started a church from scratch, and by God's grace, grew it to a sizable number. Of course, he grew in his reputation among the bigger Christian community and his fellow ministers looked to him as an example.

Soon, his reputation opened a door for him to minister in a certain country. He was greatly used by the Lord in reaching out to many who were lost without Jesus Christ in that country. Of course, blessed with such a success, he was always ready to go back there again and again. In fact, he began to hand over the great work of pastoring his growing

church to his associate as he directed his time and energy to the wider field of ministry.

And that was when the evil one began to take a foothold in his life. Every time he was in that country for ministry, he would have a local lady co-worker to be his interpreter. And the many times they worked together provided the opportunities for the evil one to tempt them into developing an affair.

When his extramarital affair was exposed, he was disciplined by his church and had to resign from his office. Unfortunately, his wife also decided to leave him. He lost his ministry and his family. He is still trying to pick up the pieces today.

It is so true that when we are most passionate for God, we need to be most careful because we can be most vulnerable to the evil one. What we consider as God's open door may well be a door we open ourselves to invite the evil one to have a foothold in our lives. We need to grow in the fear of God and not be strayed away. We need to guard our God-given post if we truly want the joy of completion—i.e. to start and finish well.

It is the same in the working world today. The trend today is many have to travel whether they like it or not. As we serve God even in the market place, we need also the fear of God in us. If we are not careful, all the moving around may open a door of vulnerability that makes us fall.

The caution is when “the wider ministry” or “the wider world” is more exciting than the work, the things, or the people at home, we must then beware—the enemy may well be at work. So one way to grow in the fear of God is to know clearly what's an open door from God and what's a door of vulnerability we ourselves open to the evil one to have a foothold in our lives.

The fifth time the enemy approached Nehemiah, it was with an unsealed letter accusing him of revolt and wanting to be king in Judah. This would be a very serious accusation.

Letters to governors were to be rolled up and secured with seals so that only those with authority could open and read them. But Sanballat sent an unsealed letter, one which anybody could open up and read. If some of the Jews believed what was in the letter, Sanballat would have created division within the ranks.

Let's read the contents of the letter in vv. 6-7:

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.

This is a "poison letter" accusing Nehemiah of wanting power by plotting a revolt and making himself king of Judah. The letter even claimed support for truth and validity by saying that "Geshem says it is true".

And you know what a "poison letter" is? It is simply character assassination that aims at intimidating and discrediting someone. And statements like "it's been reported" and "this person says or that person says" have caused much trouble in people relationships.

Nehemiah was falsely accused of plotting a rebellion, planning to make himself king, and having prophets prepared to announce his coronation (v. 7). If this report got back to the Persian king, there would be immediate reprisal.

The evil one has often used false accusations to upset, distract and discourage those in spiritual leadership. These accusations can be in the form of "poison letters", vicious emails, gossips and slanders. These weapons can be used by the evil one to cause leaders to lose perspective and spend much time defending themselves that they neglect their actual work.

Nehemiah didn't make that mistake. He simply denied the reports, prayed to God for strength, and went back to work. He knew that his character was such that no honest person would believe the false reports. If we take care of our character, we can trust God to take care of our reputation.

Nehemiah reply and response are in vv. 8-9:

I sent him this reply: "Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head." 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."

But not everyone is like Nehemiah. Many are badly affected by false accusations. That's why one of the favourite weapons of the evil one with regards to discouraging and dividing people is false accusations by way of letters, emails, gossips and slanders. And so as God's people working together, we must not give the evil one this foothold. If you have a problem with someone, go to that someone (that's the spirit in Matt 18:15-17). If you are aware that someone has a problem with you, go also to that person (that's the spirit in Matt 5:23-24). In other words, the spirit is to go talk with the person rather than about the person.

The enemy of the Jews accused Nehemiah of plotting to gain power and even to become king of Judah. Of course, the accusation was not true. But if it was to be believed, then the Jews would become discouraged and divided among themselves.

Today, leadership in many arenas has to do with control and power. In the church, spiritual leadership is about leading God's people to do God's work in God's way at God's time and for God's glory. It is not about fighting for control and power. It is about submitting to the Lord's headship by obeying Him as Scripture teaches, and serving Him by serving others.

It is the same today as it was in Nehemiah's time. The fight for control and power (whether perceived or actual) can lead God's people to be discouraged and divided. Hence, we must not give the evil one a foothold in that. It is true today as it was in Nehemiah's time—God's people must grow in their conviction to fear Him and not incur His displeasure by straying away. Stay with our God-given work and stay at our God-given post. Stay clear from fighting for control and power but submit to the Lord's headship by obeying Him as Scripture teaches, and serving Him by serving others.

To lead us to the joy of completion in what He has for us to do, the Lord often leads us through a journey of spiritual growth.

## **II. A second aspect of this growth is in our spiritual discernment to distinguish God's truths from the lies of the evil one.**

Verse 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."

Shemaiah was a prophet hired by the enemy to devise a plan to trap Nehemiah (v. 12). He shut himself up in his house and gave the impression that, like Nehemiah, his life was in danger. When Nehemiah came to see him, Shemaiah suggested that they both take refuge in the temple where the enemy couldn't reach them.

But Nehemiah quickly detected the trap and let it be known that he was not about to run away in the face of danger. Nehemiah rejected Shemaiah's proposal because it was contrary to the Law of Moses. It was forbidden for a layman (like himself) to go into the sanctuary of the temple.

Num 18:7 (The Lord's words to Aaron) say: "But only you and your sons may serve as priests in connection with everything at the altar and inside the curtain. I am giving you the service of the priesthood as a gift. Anyone else who comes near the sanctuary must be put to death."

Nehemiah knew that Shemaiah was a false prophet because the message he delivered was contradictory to the Word of God. According to the Law of Moses, Nehemiah knew that as a layman, he would not find safety by hiding in the temple sanctuary. Instead, he would be put to death for violating the

Law of Moses. We must test any message, even if that message comes from somebody who claims to be God's servant. We need to grow in spiritual discernment to distinguish God's truths from the devil's lies. We need to have firm grounding in the Word of God and sensitivity to the Holy Spirit's guidance in order to exercise such discernment.

It is possible that your best friend may be your most dangerous foes. Many people today are faltering in their Christian faith because they listen to the advice of their friends. But those friends may not be reflecting the wisdom of God. It sounds like good advice because so many people follow it, but it may be totally wrong. We must check everything by the Word of God and the wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

Nehemiah detected something wrong. He realized that a prophet who was really from the Lord would say nothing not in line with the commands of God.

So he answered in vv. 11-13:

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!" 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.

Nothing substitutes for knowledge of the Word of God and sensitivity to the Holy Spirit's guidance. That is how you can detect error and tell what is wrong.

A Christian listens to a different drum beat. He is following his Lord, not the voices he hears around him. The Lord Jesus said to His people, "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me" (John 10:14). Nothing will free us more from the subtle pressures and temptations of today than to remember who we are—we are the Lord's sheep and we are to hear His voice and follow Him.

ILLUSTRATION: A native American left the reservation to join his cousin who lived in the city. One day, as they were walking down a busy street, the native American said, "I hear a cricket." His city cousin was amazed because all he could hear was the traffic. After a short search, the man reached down and picked up the cricket. When he stood up, he pulled some change out of his pocket and dropped it on the sidewalk. The noise was no louder than that of the cricket, but immediately several pedestrians stopped and turned toward the sound. The man then turned to his cousin and said, "See, people hear what's important to them."

What are you hearing today? What is it that's important to you?

Indeed, there will be many false voices around us, each trying to win our hearing and attention. But let's learn to be wise and discerning like Nehemiah. He rejected the lies of the evil one who spoke through false prophets like Shemaiah.

The completion of the walls was an embarrassment to the enemy, but they did not give up. Satan is always looking for an "opportune time" to attack God's people and turn them against one other.

It seems incredible that any Jew would secretly cooperate with the enemy, let alone Jews who were nobles from the royal tribe of Judah! If any tribe had a stake in the future of "the city of David", it was the tribe of Judah; for God promised that a Saviour and King would come from their tribe (Gen 49:10; 2 Sam 7)

Tobiah wrote letters to the nobles of Judah and influence their thinking. Because they believed he was right, some of the men of Judah even took an oath of loyalty to Tobiah! The nobles secretly shared the letters with others, and thus the conspiracy grew.

Verses 17-19: 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. Moreover, they kept reporting to me his good deeds and then telling him what I said. And Tobiah sent letters to intimidate me.

That is simply saying that Tobiah had intermarried with the Israelites. Taking advantage of that relationship, he was stubbornly seeking to undermine Nehemiah's influence and character even after the wall was raised.

The truth is this—the devil never quits. If he cannot undermine us with fear and flattery, he will try gossip and false rumours—anything that can deter us from growing in our faith life.

Many children of God have grown cold in their life. It's not because God has quitted on them. It's because the evil one never quits at luring them to his side. And they have chosen to move over. They have grown cold towards God because the evil one has led them to think that they need other things more than God.

ILLUSTRATION: A brilliant Christian scientist came to believe that modern science had come such a long way that God had become redundant. One night, he dreamt that he was in the presence of God and having a conversation with Him.

He said to God, “Science has achieved so much for mankind that I think we don’t need you anymore. We can now clone human beings and do so many seemingly miraculous things with science. So why don’t you just leave us alone for we can now go on without you.”

After the scientist had spoken, God said, “Very well, how about this? Let’s have a man-making contest.”

The scientist replied, “Okay, great!”

God added, “Now we are going to do that in the original, old-fashioned way like what I did with Adam.”

The scientist replied with great confidence, “Sure, no problem,” and bent down to grab for himself a handful of dust.

God said, “No, no, no. You must first go get your own dust.”

The scientist awoke from his dream with a troubled mind. He suddenly realized that though he had thought he had achieved much with his hands, he found his hands with nothing to help him to start when he agreed to challenge God in a contest.

The devil never quits at luring us away from God. But take heart—God Himself never quits on us. And we can’t quit on God because we will always need Him and His sovereign power in our lives no matter how far we think we have made it here on earth.

## Conclusion

The Lord leads us to the joy of completing what He has for us to do by often leading us through a journey of spiritual growth.

- Growth in our conviction to fear God and not be strayed away
- Growth in our spiritual discernment to distinguish God’s truths from the lies of the evil one

Let me use the acronym IMPACT to sum up how we can have a foretaste of the joy of completion here on earth as a believer and as a church.

- **I**nstructed in God’s Word
- **M**obilized for Ministry
- **P**raying with Faith
- **A**doring God in Worship
- **C**aring for One Another
- **T**elling Others the Gospel

Let’s seek the Lord to help us be a people who impact in His name.

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