

Finishing Well

Neh 6

In the 2008 Olympics at Beijing, US Olympian Hurdler Lolo Jones was favored to win the 100 meter hurdles. In the final competition she was pulling away from the pack when she clipped the second to last hurdle causing her to stumble and break stride. That stumble dropped her back from 1st place to a 7th-place finish. After the race she was seen pounding the ground in tears mouthing the words, “why, why, why?” In the end her strong start didn’t count for anything, the 8 hurdles she cleared didn’t count for anything, her pulling away from the other runners didn’t count for anything. To earn Olympic metal it’s not how you start but how you finish that counts.

That’s pretty true in life too - how we finish is more important than how we start. There are approximately 100 detailed biographies of men and women in the Bible, and roughly two-thirds of them don’t end well. Paul was able to say, “I finished the race” – but a lot of people who start the race well, don’t finish the race well. No matter what our age is, whether we’re closer to the starting line than the finish line, or we’re about to “break the tape”, it should be our aim to finish well.

But as we’ll see in Nehemiah 6 this morning, finishing well doesn’t just have to refer to the end of our lives – it can refer to being faithful to complete a task God that God has given us to do. No matter what your age is, God has given you work to do for His glory in this season of your life. And you want to finish it well, and then the Lord will call you on to a different season and task, and you want to finish that well.

Title: *Finishing Well*

Neh. 6:1-4 (pray)

If you haven’t been with us, Nehemiah was the cupbearer to the King of Persia when God called him to travel 800 miles to Jerusalem to help his people rebuild the walls and restore the safety and dignity of a devastated city. In chapter 4 we saw that the surrounding nations, led by three shady characters named Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem, were furious that the wall was being rebuilt because that meant that they wouldn’t be able to kick Jerusalem around anymore and take economic advantage of her and here in Chapter 6 as the wall nears completion we find these guys are even more determined to stop Nehemiah.

But when they hear that the wall is almost finished and *that there was no breach left in it*, they realize that attacking the city by stealth isn’t an option anymore. The city isn’t going to be a pushover anymore, partially because the walls are almost completely rebuilt, but also because Nehemiah has restored the spirit and confidence to a fractured and disheartened people. So Sanballat and his friends switch strategies and rather than attack the city, they decide to attack Nehemiah’s character with the hope of getting him to compromise in such a way that would damage his reputation and sabotage the work.

Few things can be more dangerous to a believer’s character and testimony than compromise. I’m not talking about the kind of compromises we all need to make on non-essential issues. I’m not talking about meeting people halfway when there is a difference of opinion or preference on issues that don’t bump against God’s word. If we never make concessions with others, we’re probably proud and stubborn. That’s not the kind of compromise I’m talking about. Compromise can also mean to make a shameful concession and it can mean to weaken and damage, and all that is what I mean by compromise: choices

and decisions that weaken and damage our character and reputation through shameful concessions that God warns us not to make. As we unpack this chapter I want to point out four characteristics of compromise that are played out between Sanballat and Nehemiah.

I. **Compromise is often just a small step in a bad direction**

Notice how Sanballat and his allies have changed their tone towards Nehemiah. In chapter 4 they are ridiculing and threatening to kill the Jews, but now they come with a friendly invitation: let's meet at the Starbucks in Ono and talk over our differences. It would have been a tempting offer. First of all, they were the prominent leaders of the nations surrounding Jerusalem. Might not hurt to try to build a bridge to these guys and maybe build some personal credibility as well.

On top of that, Ono was only about 28 miles away – Nehemiah could be there and back again in a few days. Not a big deal, what's a few more days lost on the building project?

And that's how compromise often comes to us: just a small step in a bad direction. With compromise, you're not going the whole distance; you're just taking a small step towards it. And that's precisely the danger of compromise: it doesn't seem like such a big deal cause it's such a small step. But the enemy of our souls knows that all he has to do to change our destination is to change our direction.

That danger can be amplified when we feel strong in a particular area. Nehemiah was in a stronger position now than he was a few weeks earlier. Then they could laugh at his aspirations, not those plans are almost nearly complete. He is a success, the city is strong, his leadership has been "validated" by the results. That sense of strength could have made Nehemiah relax his guard.

Sometimes the areas where we are most vulnerable are the areas where we are least vulnerable – if we grow overconfident in our strength and stop humbly depending on the Lord for our strength. Paul warns us in 1 Cor. 10:12: *So, if you think you are standing firm (that's our sense of strength in an area), be careful that you don't fall!*

I have a friend who many years ago left his wife for a woman that he worked with. And here's the shocker: he and his wife AND the other woman were all Christians! How did he get to the point that he abandoned his wife and children and moved in with this woman? It started with a small step: they started taking lunch together and talking about spiritual things together. Nothing sinful about eating lunch, nothing sinful about talking about spiritual things. And the spiritual component of their relationship made them feel a false sense of strength against temptation. But deep inside, they began to realize that they were taking a small step in a bad direction.

This story has a happy ending. The Lord touched his heart after about a year and he deeply repented and returned to his wife who deeply forgave him and God restored their marriage. Thank God for His redemptive mercy that can take the mess we make of our lives and redeem it for something good. But there was so much heartache and loss and damage over that year and beyond. Many a person who has withstood a full-on frontal assault has fallen by increments through compromise.

Don't take the first step

Nehemiah was wise enough to see through their disguised friendliness and know that they meant to hurt him, not talk with him. If we could see that sin never has our good in mind, always our harm. Satan never

has our good at heart, only our harm, we'd know that that first small step is not a small step at all, it's a huge step in the wrong direction.

So how do we resist the call of compromise? The same way Nehemiah did. He refused to even take the first step toward them. Four times they asked him to meet – that can get wearying. Temptation to compromise is often relentless. The enemy of our souls is persistent if nothing else. But Nehemiah gives no ground. He doesn't try to rephrase the answer, or appease their request. He just tells them he can't come, he's busy working on a great work.

How do we resist compromise? By not taking the first small step. By keeping our eyes on Jesus, our faith in God, and our hands busy with the work He has called us to do. I think that's a part of what it means to walk in the light – to be where God calls us to be when God calls us to be there doing what God's called us to do. And when we sin (which is to take a step in the wrong direction) we come back to the light through confession of that sin and repentance, receiving God's forgiveness and cleansing and we're put back on the right path and in the right place. When you are convicted of an area where you have been compromising, or you're being tempted to compromise, bring it to the light, confess it to the God, and receive forgiveness through Jesus' blood, and grace to stand firm in the face of future compromise.

II. Fear of what people think of us can be a powerful pressure to compromise (vv. 5-9)

When Sanballat and co saw that Nehemiah wouldn't meet with them, they sent an open letter (which meant that anyone who wanted to could read it) to Nehemiah accusing him of setting himself up as king, and staging some prophets to confirm it. It's an accusation that would be very damaging to his relationship to the king of Persia who supported him on this trip, who would view this as a direct betrayal of his trust and confidence in Nehemiah. It's the same accusation that stopped the work 12 years earlier under Ezra, and it's an accusation that could cost Nehemiah both the work and his life. And all he has to do to fix it, his enemies say is, "*come and let us take counsel together.*" (vs. 7) Just meet with us Nehemiah and I'm sure we can straighten all this out.

If Nehemiah had been the kind of man who feared what people thought of him, he probably would have stopped everything to shut this slander up. The goal of this letter is stated in verse 9: *they all wanted to frighten us, thinking, "Their hands will drop from the work, and it will not be done."*

Fear of what people think about us can be a powerful motivation towards compromise. It can pressure us to morph our opinions into the shape of the crowd we're hanging with so that we become a type of human chameleon, shifting our convictions to match whatever group we're near. Fear of what people think of us can tempt us to push aside the voice of our conscious when the boss asks us to do something we don't think is right. It can press our mouths shut when an opportunity to tell someone about Jesus comes up. In this way, the work of the gospel can be stopped by the fear of what people think of us.

How did Nehemiah deal with these accusations and the natural fear that others might think they are true? Once again, he just stands his ground. He answers their slander with the truth: *no such things as you say have been done, for you are inventing them out of your own mind.* He doesn't run around trying to defend himself, he doesn't leave everything to take counsel with them (which simply would have been them killing him), he doesn't see it as his responsibility to silence every bad thing that could be said or thought about him. He simply calls their bluff and keeps working. And I think it's fair to say that to some degree he did deal with fear, but instead of taking counsel with his enemies to resolve things, he takes counsel with

God. They wanted to frighten him, but he prays *“But now, O God, strengthen my hands.”*

There is no better refuge from the fear of what people think of us than the fear of God. The fear of the Lord doesn't paralyze us, it sets us free. It's not a snare, it's a key to unlock the cage of the fear of man. There will come a day when we will all see that there is no opinion in all the universe that really matters except God's opinion. The Lord wants to help us see and believe that here and now, and give us a boldness that frees us from the fear of what people think about us. Stand firm in the face of compromise.

III. Spiritual compromise is often just self interest in religious garb

Finally we come to this odd section. **Read vv. 10-14.**

Nehemiah goes to visit a prophet named Shemaiah who gives a terrifying vision of people coming to kill Nehemiah by night. He offers to go with him (maybe he says his life is in danger too) and they can shut themselves in the temple. But it's a fraud. Shemaiah was paid to give this false prophesy to scare Nehemiah into compromising his character and God's word in a way that would surely damage his reputation. Nehemiah answers Shemaiah on two levels:

Should a man such as I run away? – I'm not the kind of guy who runs away from danger. *And what man such as I could go into the temple and live?* I am not a priest and God should and would smite me dead if I went into that section of the temple, even to save my own life. I am not worthy of doing that. Nehemiah stands firm. He can't be swayed, and the secret is that he feared God. So often after dealing with men, he goes to God. Prayer is a constant in this book, sometimes just quick prayers but it reveals that Nehemiah lived his life aware of God's sovereignty above all things.

One of the most serious compromises is spiritual compromise: using God for our own selfish interests. And again, it can come in many forms: believing something is true, not because we've been convinced by scripture but because we want it to be true. It can come in the form of following a religious leader without question because we don't want to risk their disapproval. There is always a temptation to put ourselves at the center of our faith instead of keeping God in the center. Discipleship is a lifelong process of taking ourselves off the throne and putting God on the throne of our lives! When God is on the throne, we won't allow anyone to intimidate us into spiritual compromise.

The wall is finished (vv. 15-19)

Through all of this, Nehemiah stands firm and keeps working and the wall was finished in an amazing 52 days. Every scoffer is silenced and his enemies are silenced. Tobiah keeps persisting, but Nehemiah is steadfast. Every plan to compromise his character fails and the task God called him to months ago is completed. His work isn't done – next God will call him to rebuild the community of God – but this task, the task of rebuilding the wall is finished. Nehemiah completed this assignment and he finished well.

Conclusion

God calls us to finish well – not just at the end of our lives, but to finish well the assignment He has given us right now. But the reality is, we have all failed at points. We have all clipped hurdles and stumbled. We can all think of ways we have compromised and fallen. God calls us to live an uncompromising life and finish well. But if we do fall, *when* we fall, what hope do we have? What hope can pick us up so that we

can run the race again?

I began this message with a story of hurdler Lolo Jones. Let me close with a story about a runner named John Landy. Landy was an Australian Olympic runner in the 50's. One of the races he will be best remembered for happened at the Australian National Championships in the 1500 meter race. A man named Ron Clarke was leading the pack. Clarke was the 1500 meter world champion at the time and it looked like he had this race, when another runner clipped Clarke's heel causing him to fall. Landy had to leap over him to not run over him. But incredibly, in an unforgettable display of sportsmanship, Landy stopped and doubled back, helping Clarke back to his feet and back into the race.

Landy then went on to run the race, and in what's considered one of the greatest moments in Australian sports history, he made up the deficit and won the race.

In the race we are running, there is only one Champion. We have all stumbled and fallen – none is righteous, no not one – and we were disqualified from the race and cut off from God by our sin. Jesus entered the human race, and ran it perfectly without stumbling – he never sinned in thought, word, or deed. But Jesus not only finished the race perfectly, he stooped to pick up fallen sinners and help us back into the race. On the cross Jesus said, *It is finished!* Not *it is well begun*, or *I got it started, you take it from here*. He finished well, and because he finished well, we have the hope of finishing well too, because our sins are forgiven, we have been picked up to run again, and by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith we can – and by His grace, will - finish well too.

Let's pray.