



Scott Turansky, Senior Pastor
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NEHEMIAH 6:1-16

Series: Life Lessons from Nehemiah

Let's pray together.

[PRAYER] Lord, there are people with very specific needs here this morning. I know Mary Ann asked that we as a church pray for her and her struggle to swallow right now. It's scary for her and I pray, Lord, that you'd touch her body and help her deal with her MS and other things that I can't even remember that she has. I know that inside of her heart she's just a sweet person. I love the way she prays for other people. So Lord, I pray that you'd bless her this morning. I know that there are people who are traveling this week and are traveling in the next few days. We ask for safety, Father. We also know that there are going to be times this next few days where we're with people that are family, but sometimes it's a challenge to be with family. So I pray for those who struggle in those relationships that you'd give them the ability to be centered on you and who you are and to be able to experience Christmas in a way that even in their own hearts is lifting you up. I pray for those who are looking for jobs and those who are under financial pressure, for those who are feeling lonely or discouraged at this Christmas time or depressed. Lord, we ask that you'd touch each of us in a special way. You know what we need this morning. Teach us and touch us today. We ask in your name. Amen.

There's something to be said about focusing, the ability to focus on getting something done. We all need that ability to focus. But as I was thinking this week about our focus, it's not just about focusing on getting things done and doing, but God has this call on our lives and that call is the same for me and for you. Although the doing things might be different for us, the call to be more like Christ is something that we're all called to do and be.

So I want to talk today about that focus that God has for us. Because even in the midst of the challenges in our day or the struggles that we face, in that doing it's the focus that helps us to remain centered in our relationship with the Lord. When we're centered in our relationship with Christ, then God is able to do more work in our hearts. So He grows us to be that person.

I started thinking about this idea of focus because our passage today is about distraction and actually in Nehemiah 6 (you can open your Bibles to Nehemiah 6), Nehemiah has three distractions that come his way. Now he's trying to build a wall. That's his job. He knows what he needs to do. But as I make the leap to application in my own life, I say what does God have for me? What does He want for me? Well there's a lot of doing things that I need to do in my life, but it's the being that's really going to require the focus.

See when I'm focusing on doing something it means I'm concentrating on it, but when I'm focused on being what God wants, it means I'm centered on Jesus in the midst of the challenges of life. There are distractions that want to pull me away from being centered. Some of those distractions are things inside my own heart like anger or jealousy, expectations. Those things can distract me from being who the Lord wants me to be or centered on Jesus Himself. So I want you to think in terms of what God wants you to be. It's the same as me. He wants us to be more like Him. He takes us in different paths, so the things that you do contribute to helping you to be what God wants you to be. There's an ability to be centered and focused that I think is important.

Now just as a preview I want you to know that in the story that we're going to read today Nehemiah is distracted in three ways: opportunities, criticism, and fear. I think those are things that we face in our lives. So I think it's going to be easy to make the application to our own hearts. But in my own preparation I'm asking that the Lord would speak to you and inspire you in a particular way in your life to maybe identify a distraction that's pulling you away from being centered on Him so that you can give it over to the Lord and allow Him to be the Lord of your life more in your own experience with Him.

Before we look at the passage, these are three testimonies from God's word about people who are focused on what God was doing in their lives. Let me read these. The first one was from David where he says – *One thing I ask of the Lord, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple.* So David's prayer is: Lord, I want to be centered on you. That is the one thing. I like the words *one thing* there.

When Paul's speaking in Philippians 3 he uses the *one thing* idea as well. He says – *But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.* There's this goal sense that he has in his life that's driving him forward.

The third testimony comes from Hebrews 12:1-2. *Let us run with endurance the race set out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus.* Now the Greek word *fix* there is a very interesting word that puzzled me at first. The word *fix* is to not look at. I thought well that doesn't make sense. What it means is to not look at other things so that I can fix my eyes on this. It's the distractions that get us into trouble and that's where we're going to head now as we go into Nehemiah.

Stand with me for Nehemiah 6. We're going to read the first fourteen verses or so. Okay?

When Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab, and the rest of our enemies heard that I had rebuilt the wall and not a gap was left—though to that time I had not yet installed the doors in the gates—Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message (this is opportunity, the distraction of opportunity): “Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono.” But they were planning to harm me. So I sent messengers to them, saying, “I am doing a great work and cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it to go down to you?” Four times (the opportunity comes) they sent me the same message, and each time I gave the same reply.

Now comes the fifth time. This is criticism. *The fifth time, Sanballat sent me this same message by his young servant, who had in his hand an unsealed letter that read: "It is reported among the nations—and Geshem agrees—that you and the Jews are plotting to revolt, and this is why you are building the wall. According to these reports, you are to become their king, and you have even appointed prophets in Jerusalem to proclaim on your behalf: 'There is a king in Judah.' Soon these rumors will reach the ears of the king. So come, let us confer together."*

Then I sent him this reply: "There is nothing to these rumors you are spreading; you are inventing them in your own mind." For they were all trying to frighten us, saying, "Their hands will be weakened in the work, and it will never be finished." But now, my God, strengthen my hands.

And here's the third one. The distraction of fear. *Later, I went to the house of Shemaiah son of Delaiah, the son of Mehetabel, who was confined to his house. He said: "Let us meet at the house of God inside the temple. Let us shut the temple doors because they are coming to kill you—by night they are coming to kill you!"*

But I replied, "Should a man like me run away? Should one like me go into the temple to save his own life? I will not go!" I realized that God had not sent him, but that he had uttered this prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. He had been hired to intimidate me so that I would sin by doing as he suggested, so they could give me a bad name in order to discredit me. O my God, remember Tobiah and Sanballat for what they have done, and also Noadiah the prophetess and the other prophets who tried to intimidate me.

You may be seated.

We admire Nehemiah because of his ability to stay focused. I think that we can measure our own selves as we go through our week or go through our day or go through our hour, depending on how long you have to stay focused. Can we remain centered? Because as soon as we start yelling at someone or as soon as we start being selfish, we move ourselves onto the throne and Christ is no longer in the center. So these three distractions are presented in the passage that we're going to look at.

The first one is opportunity. I think about the Christian life. Most of us as Christians we're not saying no to evil anymore. We already made that statement. I'm not going to be evil. I'm not going to do evil things. Now if you're struggling with something evil, maybe God will speak to you this morning and say you need to deal with that. But I would say most of us as Christians are saying no to evil. So it's not evil that distracts us because we know we don't want to go there. It's the good things that distract us from the best things. It's like they're reaching out to grab us, all these good things, these opportunities. That's the idea. The opportunities that we have. We have so many opportunities that we could get involved in and they sometimes pull us away from what God might have as the best for us.

So I was reminded this week about my trip to Dubai last month where Hudson (he's fifteen years old) and I were in Dubai. One of our experiences was to go through the whole Dubai market, which is about a hundred yards of shops, all the same size, small one-room shops, and they're on

both sides of the old street and their wears spill out onto the walkway. So you have about eight to ten feet that you're walking through there. But in every shop there is posted a person whose job it is to call you out, to call you and try to get you into the shop. It's a very aggressive way that they market. Now I've been in these kinds of markets before. So I just kind of ignore what's going on. But Hudson had never been in this experience before and he's a very polite boy. So he felt like he had to answer everyone.

Now there's a lot of people yelling at him. He's feeling like he has to talk to them. So they're saying things like this: "Where are you from?"

He's saying, "I'm from America."

"Oh what state are you from?"

"From Maryland."

He says, "Oh do you like Trump?" So trying to get him sucked into some kind of a dialogue. So he feels he has to answer these people.

So we're going and another line of dialogue. "We have everything here. What are you looking for? I can get you anything. We have sales here for you." So trying to suck him into their shop.

In one case they said, "Where are you from?"

He says, "I'm from America."

He says, "Oh let me shake your hand." So he reached out to shake their hand, they pulled him right into the shop.

It was just a really interesting experience for him. I just kind of watched all this take place and kind of laughing, but just letting him kind of learn from experience about all the ways that you can get sucked into these various shops.

That was the picture I had in my mind about some of the distractions that take place in our lives. They kind of come on us in ways that are so subtle or so unexpected that we're drawn in before we realize it.

There are certain companies in our world today that have the goal of distracting us. That is their goal because they want our attention. Those are companies like Google, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram. So they actually because they know our habits of viewing or our buying habits are able to tailor their notifications or they process through a Facebook post to grab our attention.

I don't know about you, but for me it's like I get a notification about some interesting thing about one of my grandkids, so I'll click on that and I'll look on my smartphone and sure enough, I watch this cute little video. Then as soon as that's done, there's another thing about Elf Yourself. Isn't that funny. You know where you put your head on this elf and he dances around. I think that's kind of cool. I'm going to push on that, put my head on that, and then post that. So that will be fun. So I post the Elf Yourself thing. Then right after that there's this ad about something I was shopping for yesterday and here it is again. Oh yeah. I forgot about that. I wanted that thing. And then there's these two people dancing, it's kind of cool to watch them dance. And then oh there's a notification: Someone liked my Elf Yourself thing. So I'm going to go back and find out how many people liked my Elf Yourself. By the time I'm done, an hour...I

go, whoa, I just spent an hour in distraction because all those things were interesting to me. You know the Facebook feed never ends. I mean I can continually go there and watch and watch and watch.

If I'm drawn to a YouTube clip to see something, YouTube has this down. They know what kind of videos I like, so they don't even wait to ask if I want to watch the second one. They just start playing the next one so that I'm just drawn in. I'm not saying it's a conspiracy. They're trying to market their stuff. So they want to distract me in order to capture my attention so that I will give them my time. And time is one of the most valuable things that I have.

Opportunities. They said to Nehemiah, "Come down to this plain of Ono," in verse 2. This is like a resort area down by Gaza. It's not necessarily a bad thing, except that he has some insight that can harm him. But it's not necessarily a bad thing. But Nehemiah knows where he wants to go and where God wants him to go.

I would suggest that God wants us to be centered in our heart and there are things that happen in our world that easily distract us. Traffic is one of those things that distracts us and often moves us off center. Bosses or incompetent employees or teachers or friends...I mean there's just all kinds of ways that we get distracted. We admire Nehemiah and we see him as a leader that we can emulate because of his ability to say no. "No, I'm not going to do this," he says to them.

It's interesting, though, that the message came four times. The same message four times. You know after a while you start questioning yourself. Well is this God speaking? Maybe I should be distracted by it. And maybe sometimes God does speak to us through distractions. I don't want to eliminate that. But the point is that sometimes the distractions do actually take away from our mission and a goal of staying centered in Christ and growing in Christ and allowing Him to do that deeper work in our lives. So the first one has to do with opportunity. An opportunity is what keeps us busy in our lives, I think, and hinders us sometimes from reading God's word or taking time to pray.

The second one starts in verse 5 where the fifth time now he comes with this critique or this criticism or this accusation. He basically says you're trying to set up your own little kingdom and the king's going to find out about this and you're trying to create a revolt. Now I can identify this. I do not like to be misrepresented or misunderstood. This distraction, though, of being criticized is a challenging one for us because then what happens then, at least in my life, is that I'm accused of something then my mind starts being distracted. Then I can plan my defense and I can imagine meeting with this person or doing something else to this person. My mind just starts going and going with this criticism. And then I'm distracted again, gone off center of what God wants to do in my life.

So I'm intrigued by Nehemiah's response and I really appreciate the way he responds to this rumor. *Then I sent him this reply: "There is nothing to these rumors you are spreading; you are inventing them in your own mind."* That verse 8, I think I should remember that reference. Just go look at Nehemiah 6:8. "You're just inventing this in your mind" is a great defense that he has.

But his analysis is interesting too. Notice what happens. Because sometimes we don't even know what's going on with the distractions. We just kind of go with them and we don't realize what they're doing. But Nehemiah analyzes this. He's pondering and realizes you know what, this distraction isn't good for me because...this is what he says: Verse 9 – *For they were all trying to frighten us, saying, “Their hands will be weakened in the work, and it will never be finished.”* Just the ability to reflect on our lives and not be dragged around by the companies in our lives or the other people in our lives, not allowing them to easily distract us and so we're always kind of bopping around like a ping pong ball I think is valuable. That's what Nehemiah's doing. He's looking at this and saying this is not something I want to do because it's taking me somewhere I don't want to go. So he's calling them on it and then he describes what's going on.

But then notice at the end of verse 9 he shoots up this arrow prayer. *But now, my God, strengthen my hands.* Needed here, I think, because criticism, accusation tends to weaken us, weaken our resolve, weaken our confidence. It tends to weaken our energy. It takes that away. And so Nehemiah's saying – *God, strengthen my hands.*

So the thing I appreciate that about Nehemiah here and also elsewhere in the book is that he shoots up these arrow prayers. They're just quick prayers. They're not like I'm going to get my prayer time in at the end of the day before I go to bed. There's nothing wrong with that, but if that's the only time I'm praying, then I'm saving up all this stuff from the day and it might be better for us to clean our plate off more often in that day by just shooting up an arrow prayer, saying, “God, forgive me for the way I just talked there. I want to go on.” We have a clean slate before the Lord and we're asking the Lord to give us the strength we need to stay on task, the strength we need to stay focused certainly in our activity.

But I would even suggest this idea that these three testimonies shared in the beginning is that I want to be right where God wants me to be. I want to be doing something so that I'm focused on the Lord in my own life. *Lord, strengthen my hand,* he says.

The third distraction is the one that has to do with fear. He goes to this guy's house (as he's confined in this house) and this guy says as a prophet would. In other words, as someone you would normally trust. But in this case this guy's not speaking from the Lord. So we always have to have our grid up to evaluate what's being said. Because sometimes we might listen to people that we would normally trust, but what they're saying may not be the best. So we always have our grid up to evaluate is this something from the Lord or not.

I remember one time when we first started the Calvary Chapel over in Ewing, someone came to me and said, “I have a word from the Lord for you.” I always listen to that because I do believe in words from the Lord. I do believe that God often uses people to share things with me. Some of those things, by the way, are criticisms and so I think we all need to listen to criticism. And I want to do that in my own life. But in this case the person said this: “I have a word from the Lord for you that there's someone among the people that you're working with now who's going to betray you.” I said, “Okay, thank you.” But then I went away and I started getting paranoid about every little person in the church. What's going on here?

I went and shared this with Joe Focht at Calvary Philly who had helped us get started in Ewing. I said to him, “I got this word from the Lord. I’m just trying to sort out what to do with it.” He said, “Look. If it’s creating fear in you, then it’s probably not from the Lord. You always need to be ready for people to betray you and you need to be sensitive about that, but you can’t always be imagining who it’s going to be. That is not a word from the Lord because it’s going to create dissention and distrust.” I appreciated that.

It seems to me that’s the kind of thing that’s happening here. That here’s a guy who’s sharing something as a prophet, but he’s sharing it in a way that’s not helpful and it should not take place. So the prophecy is hey they’re going to kill you. You need to lock yourself in the temple. That’s what he’s saying here.

But verse 12 here again we have Nehemiah’s analysis of what’s happening. I like this. I think we would do better to do more pondering or analyzing what actually is going on so that we don’t get distracted. Nehemiah says – *I realized that God had not sent him, but that he had uttered this prophecy against me because these guys had hired him. He had been hired to intimidate.*

Intimidation is one of those distractions that prevents us from stepping out. I suppose that a lot of the times we don’t act in our lives because of fears. That there are fears of rejection, fears of failure. I suppose that a lot of our busyness in life is because we’re trying to get ahead, we’re trying to do what we need to do, make sure we have enough money for retirement or make sure that people are pleased with us or whatever. So there are fears that sometimes drive us to get off center. There’s one thing that is important and that is to be centered on the Lord. So this distraction is another one of those things that can move us.

I’m sure if we were going to develop a list, we’d find all kinds of other distractions that are out there trying to move us from center. Certainly in the Christmas season this is an application for us because obviously the true meaning of Christmas is that Jesus was sent from heaven to be a baby who would grow up and die on the cross so that we can have eternal life. So there’s this celebration that we experience at this time of year, but often it’s crowded out by things like parties and gift-giving and so on that aren’t bad, but they are the distractions that sometimes rob us of that true meaning of Christmas that we all want to meditate on and think about and recognize.

I was listening this week to a dialogue between an eight-year-old girl and her dad. This was a YouTube video, by the way. She was saying, “Dad, I don’t understand why we have Christmas trees and we’re putting gifts under a tree. Jesus wasn’t born under a tree. He was born in a manger. We should put our gifts inside of like a manger or around a manger to recognize Christmas.” This is an eight-year-old saying this to her dad.

Her dad said, “Well Jesus did die on a tree.”

“No, he didn’t die on a tree. He died on a cross.”

“Well where does that cross come from? It comes from a tree.”

She said, “Yeah, but that’s not Christmas. That’s Easter. Maybe we should put Easter eggs on a cross instead of baskets. People shouldn’t celebrate Christmas with Christmas trees. We should celebrate putting gifts around a manger.” So it was an interesting dialogue with a very precocious eight-year-old telling her dad some very important things about Christmas.

It just reminds me to just check myself and what are the things that are most important to me in life in general, what is most important to me at Christmas time. I want to keep coming back to this idea that the most important thing for me is to be centered on Christ to allow Him to create in me this new creation. He's doing something inside called sanctification. He's building into me the qualities that I need to reflect Him and to demonstrate in my own heart who He is.

I just love the story because it lends itself well to application in our own lives. We didn't read the next verse, but I want to read them. I want to share with you the last verse from verse 15 on. This is the end of the chapter. Because I want you to see what happens when you keep your head down, when you're working on the task, when you're allowing God to work in your life. This is what happens.

So the wall was completed in fifty-two days. So they built this wall around Jerusalem in fifty-two days. It's amazing. On the twenty-fifth of Elul. When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and disheartened, for they realized that this task had been accomplished by our God.

I think about our own lives as God is building us. He's doing things inside of our hearts and our lives that as we're growing and we allow God to do those things, other people will look and say, "Wow, God is doing something in that person. Wow, there's God at work." Or many times people are attracted to the faith because they see God at work in someone's life.

As I continued to ponder the idea of distractions, I realized that there's no distraction out there that can get me if there isn't something inside of me that can be attracted to that. That if I'm a helper kind of a person, that if someone needs help, I'm attracted to that. But sometimes I can become a people-pleasing person in my life because I want people to be happy. So sometimes I can be so distracted by that that it messes with something deeper inside of my heart, which takes me back to this idea of the distractions that are inside my own heart. See when I'm allowing God to do a work then the distractions I see that take me away from my focus are really an indication of something God wants to do in my heart. I need to learn how to say no to certain things. I need to learn how to represent God in my life. I think that's the message that we have here that the real distractions come because of something going on inside of us that God wants to purify, He wants to cleanse. He wants to make us to be more like Him.

So as we look out at the opportunities, we look out at the criticism and we look out at the fears that are out there, we can pick and choose what ones we're going to go after based on what we really know God wants to do in our lives. We're tying in those decisions to what He's doing. I trust God will use this in your own heart because I believe that the most important thing that God wants for us is not to do, do, do, do. First we need to become. As we're becoming something, God, out of that, draws the doing for each one of us that might be different. Let's become more of the people of God in our lives and not get distracted by things that would take away from that in our own hearts.

Would you stand with me and let's pray together.

[PRAYER] Lord, I do want to acknowledge how big you are and how amazing and awesome you are. I suppose there are times in my own heart when I lose sight of that and then start to think that I'm bigger than I am. I know, Lord, that you're the Savior of the world. I pray that you would give us all this great sense of gratefulness and commitment to you. We just take a moment and dedicate our hearts to you right now and acknowledge this gift of Christmas. We want it to be more than a one-day-a-year event. We want it to be something that permeates our lives. We want you to be centered inside of our...we want our focus to be on you no matter what's taking place. So reveal the distractions and remove them. Teach us how to deal with them in our own lives. Lord, as we continue to sing these Christmas carols we ask that you would just quicken our hearts and help us to remember who you are, what you're doing in our lives. In Jesus' name, amen.