

Coram Deo  
Soli Deo Gloria, Soli Deo Gracia, Soli Scriptura  
Agnus Dei, Qui Tollis Peccata Mundi  
Deo Volente  
Sermon Preach at Stouffville United Church  
by the Rev.Dr. John S. Niles MSM CD

# Keep Focused

Nehemiah 6:1-19

October 23, 2022

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JXQN7W9y\\_Tw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JXQN7W9y_Tw)

”It is not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how the strong man stumbled, or where the doer of deeds could have done better.

The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena; whose face is marred by the dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs and comes short again and again; who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best, knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who, at worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly; so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.—Theodore Roosevelt

Keeping focused is not easy.

Though he would later be acclaimed as one of the greatest inventors of history, Thomas Edison’s school career lasted three months. The teacher believed he was incapable of learning anything and sent him home. Edison’s mother taught him, and he was on his way to a lifetime of overcoming what seemed to be insurmountable obstacles. Among his most famous inventions were the commercial incandescent light bulb, the phonograph, and the fluoroscope. Most of his inventions required months if not years of dedication to overcoming obstacles before seeing any results.

In a 1921 interview, Edison described his persistence this way: “After we had conducted thousands of experiments on a certain project without solving the problem, one of my associates, after we had conducted the crowning experiment and it had proved a failure, expressed discouragement and disgust over our having failed to find out anything. I cheerily assured him that we had learned something. For we had learned for a certainty that the thing couldn’t be done that way, and that we would have to try some other way.”

Very few things of lasting significance and value are achieved without overcoming serious obstacles. The story of almost every “overnight success” is actually the story of someone continuing to persevere in the face of great difficulty and disappointment.

The enemies of Nehemiah were jealous of his success. They viewed themselves wronged, because they were sidelined due to his success. When the job of rebuilding the wall was almost done, Nehemiah’s enemies began to attack him. They attempted to entice him socially, and to finish him politically and harm him bodily. The greatest of these attacks on Nehemiah began just 52 days away from completing the job of rebuilding the wall. Yet, as a great leader he knew what

many people don't and that is, that with any great work there is always great opposition. So you have to keep focused.

## I

Keep focused when people and events attempt to **interrupt you**. *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- 2 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; 3 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?" 4 Four times they sent me the same message, and each time I gave them the same answer. (Neh 6:1-4)*

Nehemiah did his best to ignore those who wanted to interrupt his work. He knew that they were desperate, dangerous and determined to harm him and destroy his work. Yet, his focus was to do the work he was meant to do and not waste time with those who wanted to hinder it.

He lived a life of dashed hopes and shattered dreams. His mother died when just a boy. He had to work in the fields to help his family. He only attended school sporadically, but read every book he could get his hands on. His business ventures and political career failed, and he became a surveyor to get out of debt. He married and had four children, but only one grew to adulthood. He regularly dealt with depression but never stopped working toward his goals. Yet we know him as one of the greatest men America ever produced: Abraham Lincoln.

She was an energetic young woman whose life was forever changed by an accident. Because her spinal cord was severed, she first struggled to survive. Forced to live her life as a quadriplegic, she nearly lost the will to live. Slowly, she achieved the impossible. She painted by holding a brush with her teeth. She produced record albums of joyful music. She married, and is now known as an encourager to countless thousands of people. Her name? Joni Eareckson Tada.

Life for many is filled with experiences of disappointment, disillusionment, and despair. As a result, relationships, families, and careers are often scarred. When we encountered Nehemiah, we found him facing events and people who would hinder the work God had called him to complete, yet he overcame. He kept his focus.

## II

Keep focused when events and people attempt to interrupt you and also **intimidate you**. *Then, the fifth time, Sanballat sent his aide to me with the same message, and in his hand was an unsealed letter 6 in which was written: "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 7 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." 8 I sent him this reply: "Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head." 9 They were 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 6:5-9)*

When Nehemiah began to experience the intimidation of others he simply refused to allow it. He said no to their demands. Even Sanballat's innuendos, rumors and blackmail didn't

seem to affect him. He wouldn't submit to the intimidation. He knew that when people are unsuccessful at attacking you personally, they will attempt to do so politically. They will try to manipulate others against you.

When Tom Hanks was promoting the movie "Catch Me If You Can," he was asked what kind of power success had brought to him. Tom Hanks replied, "Success is when you do not have to take a job that you do not want to take ... then that's true power, because that's the moment when you begin to control your destiny in a different way. Once I got to the point where I said: You know, I don't want to do this, then that was a hugely liberating moment...there is power in the word 'no'." ("Three of Hollywood's Most Powerful Just Want to Do Good Work," by Paul Fischer [www.filmmothly.com/Profiles/Articles/CatchMeIfYouCan/CatchMeIfYouCan.html](http://www.filmmothly.com/Profiles/Articles/CatchMeIfYouCan/CatchMeIfYouCan.html))

The reason he was able to overcome the intimidation of others was because he wasn't dependent on or answerable to them.

Nehemiah was also in the same position. He had the power to say no because he was answerable to and dependent on - God.

A while ago the news reported the death of Bonnie Witheral, a 31 year-old missionary serving with the Christian Missionary Alliance church. She was a medical missionary in Sidon, Lebanon.

You might remember from Bible stories of Exodus how Joshua led the nation of Israel to possess the Promised Land. That possession could not include the Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon. Joshua could not conquer those cities.

Sidon and Tyre were ancient cities, having been founded long before the Israelites entered the land of Canaan...Both cities were known for their maritime exploits and as centers of trade...Joshua could not conquer the territory (Josh. 13:3-4)...About 870 B.C., Ahab married Jezebel, the daughter of the Phoenician king, bringing Baal worship to Israel's court.

Sidon had been a hotbed of terrorist fanatics (Hezbollah and Al Qaeda). There is much hatred there for Westerners and Jews. According to the news reports, a gunman walked into the clinic in which Mrs. Witheral was administering medical aid and pumped 3 bullets into her head and then fled because she was a medical missionary.

It was meant to intimidate everyone not just to kill Mrs Witheral. It was meant to kill the work.

### III

Keep focused when events and people attempt to interrupt you or intimidate you and finally, **incriminate you**. *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." 11 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!" 12 I realized that God had not sent him, but that he had prophesied against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. 13 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. 14 Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God, because of what they have done; remember also the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who have been trying to intimidate me. 15 So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days. 16 When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God. (Neh 6:10-16)*

The enemies of Nehemiah lived by the motto, when all else fails make things up. That was what Nehemiah now had to deal with. Nehemiah was being made to look bad, weak and fearful to fellow believers. At this point they were trying to destroy his reputation. However, Nehemiah refused to compromise or be sucked into their scheme.

A young man was walking through a supermarket to pick up a few things when he noticed an older lady following him around. Thinking nothing of it, he ignored her and continued on. Finally he went to the checkout line, but she got in front of him.

"Pardon me," she said, "I'm sorry if my staring at you has made you feel uncomfortable. It's just that you look just like my son, who just died recently."

"I'm very sorry," replied the young man, "is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yes," she said, "As I'm leaving, can you say 'Goodbye Mother'? It would make me feel so much better."

"Sure," answered the young man.

As the old woman was leaving, he called out, "Goodbye Mother!"

As he stepped up to the checkout counter, he saw that his total was \$127.50.

"How can that be?" he asked, "I only purchased a few things!"

"Your mother said that you would pay for her," said the clerk.

"What, she is not my mother."

Nehemiah knew that at times there will always be those who will try to harm you vocationally, politically, and personally if you allow them. For as Einstein said, "Great spirits have always encountered violent opposition from mediocre minds." You think about that. Amen.