

## **Encountering The Enemy** **Nehemiah 2:9-10**

We're back to Nehemiah today, talking about the process of restoration God is doing in our lives. And each week so far we've talked about different reasons we might not move forward in restoration. It might be because we don't think we need it – we talked about that the first week. It might be because we haven't made a decisive shift in our hearts and surrendered to God's control. It might be because we're afraid of changing direction and moving forward in a new way. It might be because we aren't aware of our blind spots and keep getting stuck. Or it might be because we withhold certain areas from God that we want to keep to ourselves. We talked about that last week.

These are all barriers within ourselves that we need to be aware of, but it's not just these things that can hinder God's work of restoration in our lives. There's another very significant hindrance that comes from the outside that we need to be aware of and that's what we are going to focus on in the next few sermons.

I've shared this story before, but it fits in really well again today – Two summers ago Amy planted about 25 tomato plants in our garden, and of all the things in our garden, the tomatoes are probably the most important... Amy went to great lengths to give those plants the best chance of success. We carefully prepared the soil by tilling in organic mulch and sheep manure. Amy chose a new area to plant them with good sunlight, added the recommended fertilizer, and buried a fish carcass under every plant. She put newspaper down to protect water from splashing on the plant and causing blight, sprayed leaves with anti-fungal spray, put up cages to ensure support, kept the plants adequately watered – not too much and not too little. She did all these things to raise strong, healthy tomato plants and they were doing so well – looking so good and healthy.

She was out in the garden one day and noticed something wrong. The plants had some strange whitened dead spots on them. After a couple more days it got worse and the plants started looking really sick. The leaves, branches and stems were all affected. Within a week all the tomato plants were dead along with most of the other plants in our garden.

What happened???! Upon careful investigation and inspection we came to realize that someone had stood in two spots around our garden, just outside the fence, and sprayed some kind of vegetation killer that killed 75% of the plants in the garden, including all of Amy's tomato plants. We were shocked. In disbelief. Who would do that? All that hard work and then someone from outside came in at night and destroyed it. We never did find out who it was.

I share that story because each of us that's in the process of restoration faces the danger of something like that happening in our lives. We can do all the right things to push past the barriers to restoration that we've talked about in previous weeks: We can know that we need restoration, we can experience a decisive shift deep within, we can overcome the fear of moving forward, we can work on discovering our blind spots, and we can surrender every part of our lives to God's control. But there's something that can still come along and knock our legs out from under us and cause a lot of damage to the work God is doing in our lives. The next three sermons I want to look at what that is.

God had done great things to begin the work of restoration in the city of Jerusalem. He had overcome many obstacles, brought Nehemiah to Jerusalem, and inspired the people to begin the work. But there was a major threat that they encountered that stuck around through the whole process, trying to destroy the work. It first shows up in Nehemiah chapter 2 when Nehemiah was on his way to Jerusalem.

Read Nehemiah 2:9-10.

*Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen.*

*<sup>10</sup> But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel.*

In these verses we are introduced to two enemies of the restoration of Israel – two men opposed to the welfare of the people: Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant. These guys show up multiple times in the book of Nehemiah to try to destroy the work. According to my study Bible, Sanballat and his descendants were governors of Samaria at that time, which is the region to the north of Jerusalem and Judah. Tobiah was probably the governor of Ammon,

which was to the east. So these guys surrounded Jerusalem on two sides and liked the way things had been with the walls in ruins. They didn't want them rebuilt because if they were, Jerusalem would once again become a defensible city and they did not see that as a favorable thing in their region. So they were very upset that someone had shown up with the purpose to rebuild.

As soon as I read about these guys several weeks ago, I started thinking about the great enemy of restoration in our lives. He's an enemy that often goes undetected because he's invisible and his army, attacks, and methods are spiritual in nature. But the damage and carnage he leaves behind is easy for all to see. I think we've seen it rise to the surface with all the fear, anger, and bitter division caused by the disruption of COVID-19 in our society. When you go to read the news headlines you can get the impression that there's a war going on among us on many levels. So many people fighting and arguing, so much anger and selfishness. We're "all in this together..." and fighting every step of the way.

And then, just this past week, another crisis exploded not that far from our own community. The cruel and senseless murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis dumped fuel on a fire that was already burning across our nation. The bitter and shameful reality of racism has boiled over again with all its hatred, violence, and rage along with injustice and division. I drove to MN on Friday to visit my parents and you could see the smoke rising over Minneapolis from all the fires lit the night before. We stopped at Mills Fleet Farm in Oakdale on the way back and they were getting ready to board up the entrances to protect the building.

It almost feels like there's a war going on... You know why? Because there is. You know all this fighting going on across our land – it's not just human in nature – humanity is full of problems, but there's a lot more going on beneath the surface that makes things even worse. There's an invisible enemy that we can't see or hear, though we can see his devastating effects. There's a spiritual enemy leading to all this carnage. It's kind of like the wind that Jesus points out in John chapter 3: you can't see it and don't know where it comes or where it goes, but you can hear its sound and you can see its effect. Sometimes it's a gentle breeze; sometimes it's a hurricane or tornado. Eph. 6:12 says, *"For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."*

Think about that when you're crying out against the bitter division stirred up by COVID-19... Think of that when you're crying out against injustice, racism, rioting, and the senseless murder of George Floyd. "How can people be so terrible?" We're only pointing to other people and casting the blame – but it's not just the people... it's not just flesh and blood that's the problem. The reason things are as bad as they are and can become much, much worse is because of the rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers of darkness – spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

We have an enemy and his name is Satan and he has many fallen angels joining with him. Rev. 12 says Satan and his angels fell from heaven before humanity came into existence because they rebelled against God. He was defeated and thrown down to earth to finish out his days. He hates God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and he hates all of humanity. And he seeks to bring disaster and carnage to the world in whatever way he can. Ephesians 2:2 calls him *"the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience."*

But there's certain people he has a special hatred for – you know who that is? You and me. Christians. People who have been set free from his dominion and power to kill and condemn. Scripture talks about his bitter hatred. Rev. 12:17 says, *"Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus."* 1 Peter 5:8 says, *"Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour."*

Satan hates the fact that Jesus showed up to bring restoration and he hates the fact that restoration is taking place in your life. Col. 2:15 says God *"disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him."* God triumphed over Satan's power in your life through Jesus and his death on the cross. When anyone puts their faith in Jesus, his payment for sin cancels out all their sins – they are nailed to the cross and completely forgiven. We are ransomed from the kingdom of darkness and brought into the kingdom of light forever and Satan hates it. He has lost. Every being in the spiritual realm knows that he's been beaten and is helpless to stop God's saving work in our lives. He's humiliated and defeated. He can't win and he knows it.

The only thing left for him to do is to try to screw things up and make us miserable – to hijack the work of restoration God is doing in our lives to rob us of our joy in Christ and keep us from bringing glory to him. So that’s the battle that we’re in personally – every day. Satan is our enemy. We’re in the middle of a war and we must learn to fight. God allows him to attack us to a certain extent for reasons that will ultimately lead to our good and the glory of Christ. He allows us to go through the battle so we can become more than conquerors in Christ, and he doesn’t leave us empty handed. He has given us everything we need to overcome the attacks of Satan and stand in victory. In 2 Corinthians 10:3-4 we’re told: *“For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. <sup>4</sup> For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds.”* Satan cannot stop the process of restoration in our lives if we stand firm in the strength God provides.

But we have to be aware of him and we have to learn how to fight. So just like the people of Jerusalem had some outside enemies to contend with, we do too. And we have to be aware of that. Knowing is half of the battle. Satan wants to blindside and ambush us and one of the ways he does that – one of the schemes he uses – is to convince us he isn’t real. He wants us to think of him like a fairytale – like a villain in a superhero movie.

We live in a world that is dominated by a naturalist world view. We’re conditioned to think that everything has a natural and scientific explanation and is void of any spiritual influence – where any talk of a spiritual enemy is seen as hocus pocus. Society doesn’t want us to believe in God, but they don’t want us to believe in Satan either. Where does that come from? How can people deny the existence of God when they look at the wonders around them? How can they deny the existence of Satan when they see the depths of evil that humans sink to? Because Satan is working behind the scenes to convince us it is so.

We have to be careful to not just go with the flow of a purely naturalistic worldview. Instead, Scripture tells us to be alert, be aware, be watchful, be on your guard... We have an enemy and he is at your door looking for a way to get in. He’s scoping out your weak spots and vulnerabilities to figure out what he can do to derail the process of restoration in your life, just like Sanballat and Tobiah were doing in Jerusalem.

And in the next few weeks we're going to look at some of the schemes he's using and what we can do to fight. But with this message today I want you to just be aware that he is there so the reality of the spiritual battle begins to become part of the equation. It's not the answer for every problem in our world today, but it's intertwined far more than most of us realize and we need to be aware so we learn how to fight and to live, and to experience the victory we have in Christ.

I encourage you in the coming week to read Ephesians 6:10-18 multiple times. Meditate on those verses, pray over them. Ask God to help you see and understand the battle. And when we come back to this topic in two weeks we'll learn about what the battle looks like and what we can do to fight, even more.