



## **"Walking In Perseverance and Discernment" (Nehemiah 6)**

### **I. INTRO**

- A. At a dinner party in 19<sup>th</sup> century England the host had asked everyone to come prepared to give a recital or reading after the meal.
1. A famous London stage actor, with all his training and experience, stood up and eloquently recited the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. When he finished he sat down to thunderous applause.
  2. Unfortunately the next person, who was not a professional or a very accomplished speaker, had also chosen to recite the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. As he started out, with very little polish, there were a few snickers at the table. Yet by the time this man finished, a stillness had fallen around the table that was far more profound than any applause.
  3. As the man sat down, the actor said to him, "I know the psalm but you know the Shepherd."
- B. Sometimes spiritual discernment is obvious and easy to detect – and sometimes spiritual discernment is more difficult to distinguish and navigate.
- C. "Discernment is not simply a matter of telling the difference between what is right and wrong; rather it is the difference between right and almost right." --C. H. Spurgeon<sup>1</sup> [Good, better, and best]
- D. Before we read our text for today I would like to ask you:
1. How is your spiritual discernment?
  2. Do you have specific criteria that you employ to engage in a discernment process?
  3. Is discernment a spiritual gift, or is it a discipline that must be cultivated?
- E. Today we are in week eight of our series in Nehemiah and we will be looking at chapter six.

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<sup>1</sup> Known as the "Prince of Preachers," he was the pastor of New Park Street Chapel (later the Metropolitan Tabernacle) in London for 38 years.

1. What we will discover is that Nehemiah withstands four different and overlapping attempts to knock him off-track in finishing the re-building of the wall around Jerusalem.
  2. We will see that he withstands these attempts through the effective use of spiritual discernment.
  3. When we read you will notice four overlapping schemes perpetrated by Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem:
    - a. Conspiracy (vs.1-4)
    - b. Intimidation (vs. 5-9)
    - c. (An effort to) Compromise (vs. 10-14)
    - d. Infiltration (vs. 15-19)
- F. With this in mind, let's read Nehemiah 6, then I will pray, and we will see what we can learn: *"Now when it was reported to Sanballat, Tobiah, to Geshem the Arab and to the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall, and that no breach remained in it, although at that time I had not set up the doors in the gates, <sup>2</sup> then Sanballat and Geshem sent a message to me, saying, 'Come, let us meet together at Chephirim in the plain of Ono.' But they were planning to harm me. <sup>3</sup> So I sent messengers to them, saying, 'I am doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you?' <sup>4</sup> They sent messages to me four times in this manner, and I answered them in the same way. <sup>5</sup> Then Sanballat sent his servant to me in the same manner a fifth time with an open letter in his hand. <sup>6</sup> In it was written, 'It is reported among the nations, and Gashmu says, that you and the Jews are planning to rebel; therefore you are rebuilding the wall. And you are to be their king, according to these reports. <sup>7</sup> You have also appointed prophets to proclaim in Jerusalem concerning you, 'A king is in Judah!' And now it will be reported to the king according to these reports. So come now, let us take counsel together.' <sup>8</sup> Then I sent a message to him saying, 'Such things as you are saying have not been done, but you are inventing them in your own mind.' <sup>9</sup> For all of them were trying to frighten us, thinking, 'They will become discouraged with the work and it will not be done.' But now, O God, strengthen my hands. <sup>10</sup> When I entered the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, son of Mehetabel, who was confined at home, he said, 'Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and let us close the doors of the temple, for they are coming to kill you, and they are coming to kill you at night.' <sup>11</sup> But I said, 'Should a man like me flee? And could one such as I go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in.' <sup>12</sup> Then I perceived that surely God had not sent him, but he uttered his prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. <sup>13</sup> He was hired*

*for this reason, that I might become frightened and act accordingly and sin, so that they might have an evil report in order that they could reproach me.<sup>14</sup> Remember, O my God, Tobiah and Sanballat according to these works of theirs, and also Noadiah the prophetess and the rest of the prophets who were trying to frighten me. <sup>15</sup> So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. <sup>16</sup> When all our enemies heard of it, and all the nations surrounding us saw it, they lost their confidence; for they recognized that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God. <sup>17</sup> Also in those days many letters went from the nobles of Judah to Tobiah, and Tobiah's letters came to them. <sup>18</sup> For many in Judah were bound by oath to him because he was the son-in-law of Shecaniah the son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah. <sup>19</sup> Moreover, they were speaking about his good deeds in my presence and reported my words to him. Then Tobiah sent letters to frighten me."*

- G. As you noticed, there is a lot of drama going on in this chapter! And yet we see that the wall was completed in 52-days, which was really an extraordinary accomplishment. Remember, that it had lain in ruins for about 150-years.
- H. And it is all the more extraordinary when we consider all the energy that went into distracting and discouraging Neh and the people, who came from all walks of life, from completing the task.

## II. BODY

A. There are two things that I want us to consider from Neh 6 today:

1. Neh practiced what we might call "strategic discernment" to withstand these schemes of the enemy. So, I would like to ask the question this morning, **"What does the Bible have to say about practicing spiritual discernment?"**
2. The second point for this morning is meant to be an encouragement to you: **"Whatever God starts, He will finish."**

B. We will look at each point one at a time:

### 1. **What does the Bible have to say about practicing spiritual discernment?**

- a. The first question we must consider: Is spiritual discernment a spiritual gift or is it a discipline that must be cultivated? The answer is YES!

1) *"But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good... to another discerning of spirits..." --1 Corinthians 12:7, 10 (NKJ)*

- 2) *“But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.”* --Hebrews 5:14
- b. So, on the one hand ALL that we have access to is a gift from God. On the other hand it seems that we can grow in the discipline of spiritual discernment. So our question becomes: **How does this happen?**
- c. Here are two definitions of spiritual discernment:
- 1) “Discernment is the skill of understanding and applying God’s Word with the purpose of separating truth from error and right from wrong.” --Tim Challies<sup>2</sup>
  - 2) “Discernment is the process of making careful distinctions in our thinking about truth. In other words, discernment is the discipline of learning to think biblically.” --John MacArthur [Theology matters!]
- d. Notice one author identifies spiritual discernment as a skill while the other describes it as a process. There is a **source**, a **power**, and a **process** by which we grow in spiritual discernment.
- 1) The source is God
  - 2) The power is the Holy Spirit (And it should be noted that God could speak to us in a dream or a prophetic word or some other revelatory way the way he did to Philip in Acts 8:26 or to Paul in Acts 16:9. However, it does not appear that this is God’s normative way of leading us. But it is possible. Anything that comes in a revelatory way MUST be clearly confirmed by Scripture.)
  - 3) The process is explained in and through the Bible.
- e. I would like to give you **five general (overlapping) principles for growing in spiritual discernment:**
- 1) Always begin with what is clear and irrefutable.
    - a) We are to discern the unknown by what is known. Adam and Eve neglected this in the Garden of Eden.
    - b) God gave them a very clear command and they violated it – and the consequences were enormous.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Discipline of Spiritual Discernment*, Crossway 2007:60. (John MacArthur wrote the Preface.)  
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- 2) Be passionate in our desire for God.
  - a) This will sound controversial: We must let our desire for God educate (not override) our mind in discerning God's will.
  - b) *"If anyone desires to do [God's] will, he will know whether My teaching is from God or whether I speak on My own."* -- John 7:17 Berean Study Bible
  - c) The Greek word for "desires" is *thelō* denoting emotive action or unconscious desire.<sup>3</sup>
- 3) Be intellectually rigorous AND tenderhearted.
  - a) *"...Always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect."* --1 Peter 3:16
  - b) "Soft-heartedness does not excuse soft-headedness, and hard-headedness does not excuse hard-heartedness.
- 4) Keep the main things the main things. There are at least five "main things":
  - a) Know the Bible
  - b) A working knowledge of historic church teaching
  - c) Human reason in the context of accountability
  - d) A clear conscience. *"I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man."* --Acts 24:16
  - e) Prayer. We are to test what we are discerning by holding it up before God – and His Word

If one of these "main things" do not line-up you do not have accurate spiritual discernment.
- 5) Look for the fruits of the Holy Spirit.
  - a) Especially the first three: love, joy, and peace (Gal 5:22-23).
  - b) And then there's *"Let the peace of God rule [to act as umpire] in your heart."* --Colossians 3:15 (emphasis added)

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<sup>3</sup> *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible.*

- f. One theologian said that the pursuit of spiritual discernment is more like writing love letters than taking final exams.
2. That brings us to our second point – and it's really just an opportunity to encourage you: **"Whatever God starts, He will finish."**
- a. Certainly we see this in and through the life and work of Neh. Even with all of the opposition – both from without and from within – the wall gets re-built in 52 days!
  - b. If you're anything like me, sometimes you feel like you're making a lot progress in your Christian life -- and then there's a big ugly set-back. You know, the old "three steps forward and two steps back" rule.
    - 1) Some seasons of our lives can be very discouraging. Or we wonder, "Am I ever going to get over this sin?"
    - 2) Am I ever going to break free from my depression or anxiety or worry? Will I ever stop getting angry?
  - c. Here is what I'd like you to see as we close: God has promised that He will make you like Jesus. God is not giving up on you. God won't leave you in the rubble. God is patient with us. God has a perfect plan for us. God is working in us to change us.
    - 1) Sometimes the Christian life (i.e., sanctification) can feel like a slugfest...
    - 2) And sometimes we become aware that there is residue of God's hand upon our lives...
  - d. So as we close I'd like to share with you three verses:
    - 1) The first one is Romans 8:28-32. Theologians refer to this passage as "the golden chain of salvation": *"And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. <sup>29</sup> For those whom He foreknew [Greek: prognosis], He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; <sup>30</sup> and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified. <sup>31</sup> What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? <sup>32</sup> He who did not spare His own Son,*

*but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?" --Romans 8:28-32*

- 2) *"For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus." -- Philippians 1:6-9*
- 3) *"Cease striving and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth." --Ps 46:10* Jesus Himself is our present refuge AND our future victory.

### III. CONCLUSION

- A. "Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of -- throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself." --C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*<sup>4</sup>
- B. We see this in and through the book of Nehemiah. The people thought that God was only rebuilding the walls and the gates, but God was rebuilding His people.
  1. God loved rebels, fools, and idolaters so much that He gave His only beloved Son, Jesus, to redeem us.
  2. Here is the gospel: For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). Your sin was such that God HAD to send Jesus to die for you. That's the BAD NEWS. But here's the GOOD NEWS: Jesus wanted to come and die for your sins – so that you (and I) could be welcomed into the very presence of god.

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<sup>4</sup> Touchstone, 1996:175–176.

## **P.A.S.S. Questions For KHC Life Group Leaders (or personal study)**

**Sermon Dates:** March 5-6, 2016

**Sermon Title:** Walking In Perseverance and Discernment

**Sermon Passage:** Nehemiah 6

**P** - Participation (get everyone involved in the dialog)

1. What was the most recent major decision you have made?

**A** - Application (makes it personal)

2. Do you have a specific (discernment) process in place for making important decisions?
3. Quickly review the five general (and overlapping) principles for growing in spiritual discernment. Are there any that you hadn't thought of before? (II, 1, e)
4. What is the difference between "experiential theology" and "biblical theology"?
  - a. Simply put, "experiential theology" looks for the "experience" initially and then forms doctrine or interpretation of Scripture based on the experience, even if it does not fit into the normal orthodoxy or "praxis" of the church.
  - b. For a good explanation of "biblical theology" check out this link:  
<https://www.crossway.org/blog/2015/06/why-all-christians-should-care-about-biblical-theology/>

**S** - Scripture (thinking biblically is a learned behavior! :-)

5. What is the difference between biblical discernment and the sin of being judgmental? Can discernment be taken too far?
6. Consider the implications of this statement: Every Christian is a theologian; the problem is, some are sloppy theologians.

**S** – Sharing (aim for a time of honest reflection, authenticity, and transparency in a safe atmosphere modeled by you). [Choose one of the following as a final dialogue question.]

7. Review the concluding illustration by C.S. Lewis. How does this illustration help you think about the difficult times in your life? What application can you draw from this illustration related to what God is doing at KHC?