We are now over the hill in our study of the Book of Nehemiah. The last five Sundays, we have been learning how Amazing Things Can Happen when we pray, when we plan, when we work together, when we overcome antagonism, and when we stop strife. Today is the sixth message of eleventh on the topic of, “Amazing Things Can Happen When We Stay Steadfast.”

To be “steadfast” means to stay focused, persistent, and unwavering about fulfilling a goal or task. In other words, you know what needs to be done, and you won’t stop until you make it happen.

Is this something you need to hear and learn about? I mean, are you easily distracted or discouraged when you are trying to do something good and are giving your all, yet you allow outside forces and voices to stop you? It has happened to me. You are not alone. Sometimes I have second-guessed myself because I wanted to please people or didn’t want to upset them but ended up sabotaging the work God entrusted me—for nothing.

Nehemiah can teach about being steadfast. He stayed focused and unwavering even as he faced battles from beginning to end in this story. As we have been learning, he had to overcome many obstacles and attacks since he arrived at Jerusalem to rebuild the city and its walls—which had been in rubbles for over 100 years after being destroyed by the Babylonians.

While organizing and leading the work, Nehemiah overcame threats of violence and emotional antagonism from outside enemies and strife within his people. The work was threatened from all sides. At any time, everything could have gone bad, and the work stopped. But Nehemiah was wise, clever, and unhesitant in his faith.

And now, by chapter 6, despite all the challenges and distractions, they completed the work, as it says in verse 15, “So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days.” Remember, for over 100 years, these walls were in ruins, and now they had been completed in just 52 days. If that is not an Amazing Thing, I don’t know what it is then.

However, this kind of “amazingness” and miracles only happen when we are unhesitant with our faith and trust God’s plans.

So, there is one last thing we need to learn regarding overcoming challenges. Perhaps this challenge is the most insidious of them all. Before the wall was declared completed, this is what happened as Nehemiah and the others were finishing the work,

“Now when it was reported to Sanballat and Tobiah and to Geshem the Arab and to the rest of our enemies that I had built the wall and that there was no gap left in it (though up to that time I had not set up the doors in the gates), Sanballat and Geshem sent to me, saying, “Come and let us meet together in one of the villages in the plain of Ono.” But they intended to do me harm. 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 to come down to you?” They sent to me four times in this way, and I answered them in the same manner. In the same way Sanballat for the fifth time sent his servant to me with an open letter in his hand. In it was written, “It is reported among the nations—and Geshem also says it—that you and the Jews intend to rebel; that is why you are building the wall; and according to this report you wish to become their king. You have also set up prophets to proclaim in Jerusalem concerning you, ‘There is a king in Judah!’ And now it will be reported to the king according to these words. So come, therefore, and let us confer together.” Then I sent to him, saying, “No such things as you say have been done; you are inventing them out of your own mind” —for they all wanted to frighten us, thinking, “Their hands will drop from the work, and it will not be done.” But now, O God, strengthen my hands.”

The wall was almost completed; the gaps were closed, but the gates were not yet finished. For the enemies of Nehemiah and the work of God, this was a “now-or-never” time. If they didn’t do something immediately to stop the work, the walls would be finished.

So, Sanballat and Geshem tried to arrange a meeting with Nehemiah. This seemed a friendly meeting, perhaps an opportunity to make amends and reconcile past grievances. Their invitation had a sense of a break for a few days of rest out on the plain of Ono—a resort-like place.

Remember, these are the people that not long ago were mocking them and threatened them with violence. But Nehemiah was not naïve and could see through their motives. As Sanballat and the others were now trying to flatter Nehemiah, he was no fool and knew that their friendly offer was anything but. He sensed the danger when he said, “But they intended to do me harm.” So, Nehemiah said, “Oh, no!” to Ono.

There is something here significant to learn: those who wish us harm will not always be self-evident because they use flattery and even pretend to care about us. But they show their true colors when we don’t give them what they want. Then, they quickly get upset and turn against us. And that is precisely what happened here.

After they insisted several times to get Nehemiah to come them and he rejected their invitation every time, the turn to slander and intimidation,

“Sanballat for the fifth time sent his servant to me with an open letter in his hand. In it was written, “It is reported among the nations—and Geshem also says it—that you and the Jews intend to rebel; that is why you are building the wall; and according to this report you wish to become their king. You have also set up prophets to proclaim in Jerusalem concerning you, ‘There is a king in Judah!’ And now it will be reported to the king according to these words. So come, therefore, and let us confer together.”

When they could not accomplish their purpose of getting rid of Nehemiah by offering a “fake peace,” they slandered him. These attacks began the way many verbal attacks do, reporting what others have allegedly said. I am talking about vague, unsubstantiated accusations. The kind that often sound like, “I heard some say…” or, “Several people are talking about…”

By doing this, they were trying to intimidate Nehemiah, propagating the lie that he wanted to be the King of Judah. They made their threat plain, “These matters will be reported to the king. So come, therefore, and let us consult together.” They knew he had the favor of the Persian king and how much he cared about him. Perhaps this was the greatest threat Nehemiah had to face, that is, to second guess himself out of his loyalty for the king. They knew he would not want the king to distrust him, so they used his loyalty against him.

But all this was false, of course. The purpose of the slander was intimidation to make him stop from finishing the work. So, what did Nehemiah do against their slander? He told Sanballat he was a liar but did not do much after that. He did not engage or try to prove Sanballat wrong point by point. That would have been a huge distraction for him, and he wasn’t going to waste his time. So, he denied the gossip, prayed to God for strength, and he went back to work.

People like Sanballat don’t care about facts, explanations, and evidence. If they are successful in harming you, they don’t care what they are called. All they want is for you to give in to their demands and see you defeated. They are fueled by jealousy and ambition, and often use slander to make others yield to their demands.

Have you met anyone like that? I am sorry to say this, and it breaks my heart even to speak these words, but it is a reality that there will always be those who are friendly to your face but gossip and slander you behind your back to see your downfall. It is true; it happens. I have seen it and experienced it. It is ugly and hurtful, and you can’t explain. It is irrational and confusing. But there is a way through it.

How can we do what Nehemiah did? How can we be like him and don’t ourselves against intimidation and slander? The key is to use discernment to stay steadfast (focused, persistent, and unwavering).

Discernment is sometimes like a gift; other times like a muscle we must train by listening, observing, reading, studying, etc. Now, I know some people may confuse being discerning with being pessimistic or cynical. But, discernment is not about looking around what to judge about others, but seeing the good where others might miss it and seeing the bad where others might see good due to deception—even more so nowadays when we are constantly bombarded by all kinds of misinformation and ill stereotypes.

This is critical for our well-being. Many people suffer a great deal because they lack discernment. Without discernment, we can think a dangerous invitation from an enemy is an offer of reconciliation. We can think being religious is faithfulness or that flashy spirituality is profound faith. We can think someone is a great political or spiritual leader when they are really narcissistic, incompetent, and are hurting people.

We often suffer because we only go by what our eyes see and our ears hear and neglect what our hearts tell us about people and situations.

Here is the invitation today. When Sanballat was preparing a trap for Nehemiah, he did not fall for it because he could see the intentions of his heart. Jesus said this about that, “Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment.” (John 7:24). He was teaching about not being deceived by believing anything anyone says. But to look beyond the words and see the actions to truly know the hearts and intentions of people.

So, when we face fake flattery, slander, and intimidation, we can do what Nehemiah did: he stayed steadfast to his faith, character, and purpose. He did not doubt the voice of God in his heart because of the noise of the enemy outside. He did not yield to the enemy and their attacks by second-guessing who he was and what God was doing through him. And, through discernment, he trusted God’s Word and rejected the falsehoods of those who sought to harm him.

My friends, amazing things can happen when we stay steadfast.