

Mission Accomplished

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 8th of August 1999. His sermon is entitled Mission Accomplished and is from Nehemiah chapter 6 verse 15 through to chapter 7 verse 4.

Let's bow our heads in prayer. Our gracious Father we ask now that you bless us with hearts and minds that are truly hungry for spiritual truths from your word and motivated to walk in them.

We ask in Jesus name. Amen. I realised just before the service began that there's one lady in the congregation who remembers me well from Sunday school days in South Caulfield.

And my last memory of her class in South Caulfield was being a real little stirrer which she doesn't remember fortunately. But she's probably wondering if I've improved any since those days.

And the other man is Gavin who I sat down with and we had a critique of his last sermon. So Gavin feel free to slice me up too if you'd like. Well we're continuing with this exposition of Nehemiah.

[1 : 28] Now to sum up this morning's reading from chapter 6 verse 15 to chapter 7 verse 4.

It's an action passage. If you wanted to take one word the word action is a good summary. You see the world around Jerusalem is finished.

We see God's activity in verse 16. That is the nations around were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem. Well they had perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of God. Nehemiah's activity is still going on strongly. He's got the wall up but now there's other things to be done. There's the appointment of the gatekeepers, the singers and the Levites.

Appointment of people to administer the city that's now been properly enclosed in a wall. After perhaps a hundred years without one. The Levites by the way were some of the descendants of Aaron who had particular duties assisting in worship.

[2 : 45] And although it's not clear what the duties might be in connection with the wall. I'm sure that some of their duties in the temple were made more secure now because there was a wall around the city.

And they couldn't be interfered with by the people around them. There's another activity here too and that's the activity of the enemy.

Tobiah. At the end of verse 19 in chapter 6. And Tobiah sent letters to intimidate me. Now along with all this action are some important or continually important lessons for life.

Now what I'm going to do first is draw out the lessons from life. And having done then that to focus particularly on the activity of the enemy in chapter 6 verse 19.

And from that the whole business of dealing with the frighteners, the intimidators. So firstly then the lessons from life.

[3 : 55] Lesson one from this reading is that Christian life is not a happily ever after experience.

Once a person becomes a Christian, it doesn't mean that somehow it's a bed of roses from then on. Here in the midst of the joys of verse 15.

That's statement. And so the wall was finished. Comes the verse 19 aggravation. The leopard hasn't changed his spots.

Tobias is still working on Nehemiah. He's sending letters to intimidate him. I once read about a computer which was being fed fairy tales.

Fairy tales where the narratives were being typed into it. And it accepted all this without comment. Until at the end of one fairy tale where the statement was made. And Prince Charming married his love and they lived happily ever after.

[5 : 05] And the computer printed out a message that read married. Live happily ever after. That does not compute. That's a cynical computer.

That's a cynical computer but perhaps it's a realistic computer too. One of the things that Will and I make a point of when we're talking to the marriage education classes we have here periodically.

For couples getting married here. In fact there's one course we just started last Wednesday which will finish today three weeks. One of the points we make to them is that if we meet someone who's been married for 50 years and the couple says we've had a wonderful marriage in all that time. There's never been a crossword. We've never felt like going off and getting our own space. My response to that is there are three possibilities. One is that this couple are pathological liars. The second possibility is they have very short memories. Or else they've had a totally bland relationship with no passion. Which almost sounds like being a clone of the other person.

[6 : 21] And I'm sure actually that one of the best ways to get on someone's nerves is to be a clone of them. To be totally predictable. But the spot of that, that a life in a good marriage does get better and better.

But it's not always a happily ever after experience. Sometimes the joy is considerably dimmed. Not because of things internal to the marriage but sometimes from the death of a loved one. Well, my wife and I, in 1969 and 1970, within 12 months my mother had died followed by her father. And we really felt left floundering with two deaths in such a short time. And of course then two grieving parents left remaining.

Let the way things go in this imperfect world. That along with some of the joys, there will be some aggravation. I'm quite aware that there are what's called prosperity preachers around in some of the bigger churches.

[7 : 33] Who say that if you really are a Christian, that everything will go well. To which it has to be said, stop listening to other people who are saying that sort of thing.

And copying them. And start listening to the master. Jesus said to the apostles shortly before his crucifixion. He said, in the world you will have trouble. But take courage, I have overcome the world. 450 years before Jesus spoke those words. Nehemiah got it right. He merely notes in his autobiography here.

That Tobias is a snake in the grass. And then he just gets on with the king's business. He's not thrown for a loop because of this kind of opposition. Lesson two from this passage. A lesson from life. Is that the enemy of God and his purposes. Whoever the enemy might be. One of the most effective ways they have of carrying out their destructive work.

[8 : 39] Is to set up their stooges and allies within. Whether it be the devil finding a crack in the armour of an individual Christian and exploiting that.

Or whether it's someone exploiting some weakness of a church. In this case. Tobias. Had set up. A really helpful system for himself. Inside the walls of Jerusalem. As you read here. In today's reading. He had married. The daughter of a Jewish nobleman.

And then his son. Some years later. Had married the daughter of another Jewish nobleman. And as Nehemiah said.

And what's being expressed culturally by this is not clear these days. It says. For many in Judah were bound by oath to him. That suggests some sort of a legal thing.

[9 : 43] But a lot of us know. The way relationships go. That once Tobias. And his son had married into Jewish families. Then. There would be some sense of obligation.

I think. Most of us know. That one of the surefire ways. To really get a married woman. Angry. Is to criticise her husband. Even if the relationship is not a marvellous one.

A wife. Will really. Start up the fireworks. If she thinks her husband has been criticised. One very good marriage. In my family. My uncle Len.

And late aunt Florence. Was a very strong marriage. And when uncle Len was an academic. He was at a conference. Where. Someone who didn't know him very well. Said. Didn't believe there's any place.

For people from industry. Running academic institutions. Because uncle Len. Had in fact run ICI. Before he became chancellor. Of Melbourne University. My uncle.

[10 : 41] Held his peace. But my aunt was not impressed. And. As they were going to dinner. After this conference. My. Uncle went round a corner. And met this man. Who was white and shaking. And.

The man said. Oh good evening Dr. Wyckhardt. And then he said. Your wife has just spoken to me. And uncle Len said. Dryly.

Yes I can see that. Just consider. What life must have been like. In the family. The clans.

Where Tobias. And his son. Had married in. The women. Married. Into Tobias's family. Now have. Some kind of loyalty. To their husbands.

And if you've ever been. In a similar situation. You'll realize. The kind of compromise. Of loyalties. That occurs. But Tobias. As well as doing. Excuse me.

[11:36] As well as doing that. He'd also. He ingratiated himself. With a lot of people. There were. There were people. In Jerusalem. Who were telling. Nehemiah. What a good bloke.

Tobias is. Look at all these good things. He's done. You know. Doing a few good deeds. For that kind of person. Still doesn't make them.

A better man. Than Adolf Hitler. Or Benito Mussolini. The architects. Of World War II. Both of those. Men. In the 1930s. They were certainly. Notable.

For great public works. A lot of the intellectuals. Of Europe. Went to Italy. To see what. Mussolini had been up. With his fascist regime. That had really. Pulled Italy together. At a price.

For the people of Italy. And so. Even dictators. Can be. Socially acceptable. The problem then is.

[12:30] One of the lessons from life. Is that once. An enemy. Has become. Popular. And acceptable. In some quarters. It is then. Much harder. To get rid of them.

Now moving on. To the business. Of dealing with. The verse 19 situation. Tobiah sent letters. To intimidate me. In another translation. He sent letters. To frighten me.

If you've ever watched. The bill. On channel 2. And I know. Paul does. Because he's quoted that. From this pulpit. And I certainly do. You'll notice. That the police. And the criminals.

In that show. Use. The word. Frightener. In an interesting. Interesting way. They talk about. Putting the frighteners. On someone.

What they mean is. The sending. Of a frightener. That is a bully boy. Around to someone. To either. Scare them. Into paying their gambling debts.

[13:34] Or. To scare them. Into shutting up. About something. Some crime. They've witnessed. Tobiah. With the way he worked.

And you can see that. In the earlier chapters. He had elevated. The frightener technique. To somewhat of an art form. And now we'll consider.

A little bit about this man. First of all. His name. His name. Tobiah. In the Hebrew. It literally means. The Lord. Is good.

Now. The words. The Lord. That are used there. Are words. That are in. Some modern Bibles. Are rendered. Yahweh. The. Sacred name for God. Used by the Jews.

So his name means. The God of the Jews. The God of heaven. Is good. Now. Although he was involved. With. Government.

[14:32] In an Ammonite town. We're told that earlier. In the book. It's quite likely. In fact. By birth. He was Jewish. If he was an Ammonite. Then his name. Would have said.

Chemosh. Is good. Chemosh. Be one of the leading gods. Of the Ammonites. But no. His name said. The Lord is good. So by name.

At least. He's a Jew. By his words. And actions. He is not. St. Paul.

Writing in Romans 2. States. That. He. Is not. A Jew. That is one. Outwardly. But he. Is a Jew. Who was one. Inwardly. Having a circumcision.

Which is. Of. The heart. And that's the circumcision. That matters to God. So truly. An enemy.

[15:27] Within. An enemy. That's got the right. Religious flavor. And the right kind of name. So to speak. Is hard to deal with. Than the enemy. Outside. And obviously. He made the most of it.

It becomes even harder. To deal with such an enemy. When they. They ally themselves. With someone. They wouldn't normally. Give the time. They do. Perhaps someone. They courtially detest.

Perhaps someone. If they got a chance. They'd have their town. Plundered. Early in the book.

Tobiah. With a Jewish name. Allies himself.

With Sanbalat. Who is from Samaria. Sort of a. The Samaritans. Were a kind of a mixed race. Controlled. From. The first invasion.

By Assyria. A long while before. And so. The Samaritans. Certainly. Weren't Jews. It's odd. That. Sanbalat.

[16:24] And Tobiah. Should get together. Just a few years ago. When. The hot issue. In the Anglican Synod. The Synod being. The yearly parliament.

Of the Anglican Church. In Victoria. In Melbourne. The hot issue. Back in the. Late 80s. Early 90s. Was the ordination. Of women. Yes or no. And one day. Two men. Come up to the stage. To speak. Two or three people. With me. Looked at each other. And said. Interesting bedfellows. Because. One of these men. Is a well known. What's in Anglican circles. Called a low churchman. And the other one. Was a very high. Churchman. From a very high. Anglican church. In the suburbs of Melbourne. And both these men. And. Although. They were both opposed. To the ordination of women. They were opposed to it. For totally different reasons. And normally.

[17 : 20] They wouldn't give each other. Time of day. And one of us. In the group of men. I was sitting with. Whispered. You know.

When enemies. Get together. In a common cause. It's usually. To crucify someone. You may recall. It was the. Herodians. The Roman puppets. And the Pharisees. The. Israelite loyalists. Who got together. To crucify Jesus. Now moving on a bit further. With Tobiah. Look at. How these. Men get their. Power. The Tobiahs. Of this world. Continue to get their power. They certainly use their allies. Inside the system. As I've noted. And there's other incidents. Earlier in chapter 6. Which we can look at. That the allies. Who were the real problem. Were the ones who knew. New Nehemiah. They were.

[18 : 17] Perhaps on daily. Conversational terms. Of Nehemiah. They were the ones. Who. Spoke. In verse 19. They spoke. Of Tobiah's good deeds. In my presence.

And reported my words. To him. These were men and women. Who knew Nehemiah. And were reporting. On all his words. And moves. And probably. Every possible. Sin and weakness. Any chink. In the armor. To this day. The Tobiahs. Of this world. Use people. Inside the system. As their eyes. And ears. While not wanting to be unfair. On the people. I'm about to talk about. There was something. Almost Tobiah like. About people. In one church. In which I served. Before I was. Ordained. And I was on the vestry. And sometimes. After a vestry meeting. One woman in the parish. Would ring Wilma.

[19 : 12] And ask about. Particular matters. That had been discussed. At vestry. What was going to happen. So Wilma said to me. Do me a favour. And when you come home. From a vestry meeting. Don't tell me anything. So when.

These people. Ring me up. And ask me. What's happening. Alright. They try and use me. As an ally. For their cause. And for information. I can say. I don't know. Ian doesn't tell me. Well one. One woman. Was so annoyed. With that. She said to Wilma. Oh that's a fine husband. You've got. Doesn't tell you anything. But. She wasn't really. So annoyed. With the husband. She was annoyed. That she didn't get. What she wanted. It's not a good way to go. Today's public equivalent. Of Tobias. Are those gutter press journalists. Who are hired. To probe for dirt. In people's lives. If you've ever read. John Bunyan's. The Pilgrim's Progress. You may recall. John Bunyan. Called them. The Muckrakers. And Tobias.

[20 : 08] Had them working for him. But now to really. Flaunt his power. To really. Show what he could do. Tobias now.

Sends these letters. To intimidate. Nehemiah. And at this point. Some Christians. Particularly those. Who are. Involved in strategic ministries. For God. Worry a bit. And say. If I found myself. In that situation. What could I do about it. How would I cope. With that. Kind of. Harassment. And. This. Enemy from outside. Picking. My friends. Or so-called friends. Brains. And so. To get dirt on me. So the question is. What can. You or I do. When the frighteners. Are put on us. Like that. Well friends. The real defence. Starts. A long time. Before the frighteners.

[21 : 06] Arrive. In a nutshell. Prevention. Is better than cure. There's some. Useful logic. In Peter's first letter. Where he's talking to the Christians.

That he wrote to. Telling them a lot of things. About living. Evidently. Godly lives. Amongst the pagans. They're with. So the pagans.

Will get the message. By the quality of life. Even though they won't listen to their words. God. And in. One Peter two. The apostle says. To his friends. Keep your. Behaviour. Excellent. Among the Gentiles. And the following chapter. He goes on to ask the question. All right. Who. Has it in their power.

To harm you. If you prove. Zealous for the good. Who can do you. Eternal harm. If you do prove. To be zealous for the good. And as a kind of.

[22 : 02] Exclamation mark. To those two. Statements from. One Peter. I would add. The first verse. From Proverbs 28. Where the writer says. The wicked. Flees. When no one pursues.

But the righteous. Are as bold. As a lion. Of course. You can be as bold. As a lion. And that's what Nehemiah did. There. Was nothing.

That they could get hold of. They had tried. Hard to trip him up. And slander him. But Nehemiah. In his conduct. Left us. A robust example. He was able. To just brush.

This stuff off. And get on. With God's work. In fact. He. Earlier. In chapter 6. He makes.

A key statement. Here. In verse. 8. He responds. To one of their. Verbal attacks. He responds. To one of Sanballat's. Letters. No such things.

[22 : 56] As you say. Have been done. You are. Inventing them. Out of your mind. And that's the lion. Roaring. Nehemiah. There was no do. So he could be. As bold as a lion.

It's the wicked. Who flee. When no one's pursuing. Or as William Shakespeare. Put it. Conscience. Doth make. Cowards. Of us all. I like. Like the.

Proverbs version. Better than. The bards. Friends. We only have. Cause to be. Really frightened. When.

The frightening letters. Which is. Often our conscience. Do. Reveal. Sins and weakness. And. That's. When we're. Vulnerable. And that.

Is. When we find. Ourselves. Getting. Disempowered. By the enemies. Of God. When they. Do. Find. Dirt. And harp. On it. And often. It comes out.

[23 : 51] At the most inappropriate. Time. In a previous. Parish. In the course. Of. Two months. I discovered.

That. Three. Of the church. Going. Ladies. In the parish. Were. Having. Adulterous. Affairs. So. I had to go. To each of them. And say. If you.

Want to consider. Being. Considered. A Christian. Then. You'll have to stop. That's sin. And I knew. When I went. That they could. Well. Have got huffy.

And said. Well. If that's the way. It's going to be. You're going to be that intolerant. I won't come to church. Well. In the event. Two of them. Did stop coming to churches. In the parish. And one. Did repent.

And. Kicked the boyfriend out. If. If I had. Been. Up to some. Extra marital sin.

[24 : 46] Myself. And any one of those women. Had known it. Then that would have been. All they would have needed. To neutralize me. And I can say. Look. You've been doing this stuff.

How can you have to cheat. To tell me to stop. So I thank God. That I hadn't been up to any of that stuff. Friends. We all need.

To watch. The vulnerable areas of our lives. And get. God's walls built. Excuse me. Built around them. Just as Nehemiah.

Made his business. Secure Jerusalem. By getting a wall around it. It's good to get. God's walls. Around particularly. The vulnerable parts of our lives. One of the vulnerable parts of my life.

Which. Causes some here in the family. But. It wouldn't want to be under control. Is the difficulty I have. Walking past the second hand bookshop. But the trouble with that is.

[25 : 43] That you might. Find so many things. You can feel. You can justifiably. Have on yourselves. That you come to the point. You're actually wasting money. That God. Would want you to use. For better purposes. And I think.

We're honest with ourselves. We each know. About weaknesses. So the business of getting. God's walls built around. Our lives. To the vulnerable parts. Means. For example.

Continuing. To get our moral directions. From God's word. Not. From what other people. Think as acceptable. That route.

Only goes downhill. It never goes uphill. One. Helpful. Paraphrase. Of Romans 12. One. Which says. Be ye transformed.

By the renewing of your mind. Is. Don't let the world. Squeeze you. Into its mould. On the subject.

[26 : 41] Of being. The kind of person. Against. Which criticism. Will eventually fail. Because it's not true. About ten years ago. I read a book. I read a book. By a Christian author.

Called David Wells. A very readable. Gentleman. And in one particular chapter. Of this book. He. Talked about. Some major problems. That the. The communists.

Were having in Russia. With corruption. In government. And the problems. By the. Late 70s. Were becoming. Worse and worse. Because. Drunkenness.

Was widespread. Manipulating. The black market. And so on. Was widespread. Laziness. And lack of conscientiousness.

Was widespread. And it became. Such a concern. That at one high level. Of government. It was decided. We must. Find. If there's any. Particular group of people.

[27 : 35] In the Soviet Union. Who can be trusted. As public servants. Particularly high level. Public servants. So they. Conducted some research. And surprise.

Surprise. There is a group. There was a group. In the Soviet Union. That met the specification. You know who they were? It was the Christians. In this.

Secret report. Within the. Soviet bureaucracy. Which David Wells. Reproduces. There was this statement. That where there are. Christians in a village. The poor.

Are unconditionally. Cared for. Where our. When our pension system. Fails. The Christians. Pick up the care. Of the poor. No one. Dies.

Unconsoled. If we can't fit them. In a state hospital. The Christians. Will care for them. In their own homes. One of the things.

[28 : 31] They discovered. One of the things. That pushed them. To this. Was not just. What they saw. In village life. But also. They discovered. That of all. The reliable. The reliable. Public servants. They had.

An alarmingly. High proportion. Were Christians. Ones. Who were not interested. In corruption. Believed strongly. They should give a fair day's work. For a fair day's pay. And do the job well. And so. The atheistic government. Had an absolute. Lulu. On their hands. Now what do we do? We suddenly decide. The Christians are okay. That's.

The kind of. Living. Though. The Christians. In Russia. Even with the pressures. They lived under. They knew. About building. God's walls. Around them. And they really.

Shone for God. In a dark. And crooked society. Well friends. Just to finish off. We are now. About halfway through. These studies in Nehemiah.

[29 : 29] And most. But not all. Of the lessons for life. That arise from the war building program. Have now been covered. So at this halfway point. It's a good time. To remind you. Of God's.

Gracious. Promises. Sorry. God's gracious purposes. In giving us. The Old Testament history. Such as Nehemiah. St. Paul. Sums it up.

Rather nicely. In Romans chapter 15. Where. In talking about. The Old Testament. He says to his. Christian friends in Rome. For whatever was written. In earlier times.

Was written. For. Our. Instruction. That through. Perseverance. And the encouragement. Of the scriptures. We may have hope.

May God. Do so. To all of us. And much more. Amen. Amen.