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C1334 – October 9, 2013 – Nehemiah 5:14-6:14
Nehemiah's Example & Temptations

If you'd turn with me to Nehemiah 5 we'll cover the last six verses of the chapter and tie them in with the first thirteen verses we studied last week and move on to chapter 6. To get up to speed let's review the situation starting in chapter 4. Nehemiah is a model leader and so we can glean a lot of leadership principles from him. He came to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem which had remained in ruins since the time of the Babylonian invasion a century and a half before. His intent was to restore the city so that it was no longer a reproach and God's name was no longer a reproach among the nations. In chapter 4 the project got off to a rapid start but soon the enemy became aware of the rebuilding and began to oppose it. As a leader Nehemiah's leadership was put to the test. The first strategy used by the external enemies was intimidation. If they could intimidate the people then they would be disheartened, distracted and the work would come to a halt. Nehemiah rose to the occasion and by responding with prayer to God, an imprecatory prayer that God would judge His enemies and with perseverance in the work, he encouraged the people to continue working.ⁱ The second strategy used by the external enemies was to attack the city. The threat of warfare is a serious danger to human life that causes fear and derails progress if not causing it to come to a complete halt. Nehemiah met this opposition by praying with others for God's help and by preparing for conflict by stationing men behind the walls. When he saw that the people were still afraid he motivated them with a short speech that reminded them of God's awesome power in defeating their enemies of ancient times, a work which He would now revive on their behalf as they fought for their families. The people then continued in the work with weapons in hand or nearby and trumpeters stationed as watchmen. God answered the prayer by discouraging the enemies.ⁱⁱ

Because these two strategies failed to stop the rebuilding in chapter 5 the enemy worked his way within the nation itself, sowing the seeds of rebellion against the word of God in the hearts of the Israelites. With the enemy now within a whole new set of leadership challenges had to be faced.

Opportunistic Jews were exacting usury against their fellow Jews in the midst of a famine. This violated the law of Moses which condemned usury against one's fellow Jew. As a consequence some of the Jews had already lost their land, others had been forced to mortgage their property in order to buy grain from afar and still others had even had to sell their children into servitude in order to make ends meet. Nehemiah's sensitivity to God's word made him extremely angry but in his anger he did not sin but took himself out of the situation momentarily in order to cool off, collect himself and think through a strategy of bringing conviction to those who were exacting usury. His strategy was to construct a lawsuit based on the law of Moses, much like earlier prophets. When he confronted them with their sin they were convicted, agreed to Nehemiah's advice to return all the land, money and food and vowed a solemn oath before the priests to restore the goods. The strategy was successful and they fulfilled their oaths and the people gave praise to God.

Tonight in 5:14 we see Nehemiah extending his argument against exacting usury by pointing out how he and his kinsmen had operated during the famine. Not only had they not exacted usury but they had not even exacted the typical taxes due to the governor of the region. Rather than increasing the burden he had decreased the burden. In other words, we'd say, he led by example. A true leader must lead not only in word but in word and deed. Nehemiah knew this leadership principle well and applied it, leading by example. Let's see how it unfolds starting in 5:14. There are three steps Nehemiah and his kinsmen took to relieve the already heavy burden caused by the famine and other stresses. The first is verses 14-15, he lowered taxes. **Moreover, from the day that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes, for twelve years, neither I nor my kinsmen have eaten the governor's food allowance.** 15 **But the former governors who were before me laid burdens on the people and took from them bread and wine besides forty shekels of silver; even their servants domineered the people. But I did not do so because of the fear of God.** As a ruler he had acted very exceptionally compared to former rulers.

Nehemiah had been **appointed to be governor** of **Judah** when he returned in 444BC and he governed them till 432BC. As the top official in the province he had the right to do as **former governors** and tax the people in order to fund a **food allowance**. What he's talking about is a fund that provided for evening banquets to entertain guests. The past Persian government officials all exacted tax dollars in order to fund these big banquets and entertain guests. It was expected that the governor would do this but Nehemiah did not because he saw how burdensome this was to the people and he feared God.

Now this is obviously written after his first term of governor which lasted **twelve years** and so he's recounting in hindsight how he had conducted himself in distinction from the other nobles and rulers who were putting burdens on the people. So for **twelve years** he didn't exact any taxes on the people in order to pay for the customary evening banquets. Now the application here is that a real leader serves the people. He doesn't serve himself. He had a right but he didn't exercise the right because he saw that to exercise the right would put a burden on the people and a ruler doesn't burden the people, he serves the people. Now if we had men like this, and there are some in our government, but if this was the dominant mentality this country would be a very different place. The ruling mentality here is that we serve ourselves, we are an elitist group that deserves to enjoy government perks and therefore they take advantage of every possible perk and maximize the taxpayers burden. So instead of serving the people they are serving themselves. That is poor leadership and it's nothing new. All the former governors in Judah exercised the same policy but now that they were facing a famine Nehemiah relieved the policy in order to lessen the people's burden. He was an exceptional ruler.

The reason Nehemiah was exceptional and didn't exercise his right was simply, at the end of verse 15, **because he feared God**. To fear God means to have a deep and humble respect for Him. To live before Him knowing that you are completely open to His gaze. This is a healthy fear that produces a certain lifestyle that is above reproach. So while Nehemiah had the right under Persian law to exact taxes to pay for big banquets he also had the Mosaic Law which teaches compassion to your fellow Jews and therefore he refused to exact the taxes. Now this is a lesson taught in both the Old and New Testament; *just because you have a right does not mean you should exercise the right*. Paul had rights too, he had every right to receive support

from believers as an itinerant evangelist/discipler, but he often relinquished the right for some reason or another so it would benefit others. And basically Nehemiah is doing the same thing here, he is foregoing certain rights because he saw that the taxes were too burdensome to the people. So just because you have a right does not mean you should exercise the right.

Now another observation in verse 15 is that the servants of the former governors followed the governor's example and ruled by domineering the people too. So you see that how the top leader conducts himself filters down to those who serve under him. He gives the example and everyone else follows. That's why it's so important to lead from the top with the fear of God. Nehemiah knew that how he conducted himself was setting the example and the tone for everyone else who ruled under him. And therefore his fear of God was transmitted to the lower officials and this is the way they ruled the people, they ruled them by looking out for them and their best interests. So Nehemiah has just introduced a new style of leadership in the province of Judah, a kind of leadership that first and foremost feared God and from that came certain tax breaks that would free people from oppression and set them free to use their assets to produce more assets.

Now the second step Nehemiah and his kinsmen took to relieve the burden on the people is verse 16, he and his servants worked on the wall. **I also applied myself to the work on this wall; we did not buy any land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work.** The point here is he had the right as a Persian governor to buy their land in order to exact the necessary food to serve these lavish banquets. But rather than doing that he **applied himself to the work on the wall.** This is another key leadership principle; he did not put himself above the people, instead he got down with the people and did the work with the people. He actually got dirt under his fingernails. He actually sweat, he actually carried stones and timber. He didn't sit in his ivory tower all day and sip wine. He got out there with the people. Now by doing this what do you think he accomplished? He identified with the people and the people identified with him. They realized, "Hey, Nehemiah is one of us. He's not above us. He knows what we're going through because he's out here among us." And for any leader to be worth his salt he has to get into the world of the people and identify with the people so they can identify with him. That's what produces a camaraderie between leadership and people and if people don't sense that they sense that you are

above them, that you are an elitist and you don't really care about them, you just care about yourself. So true leadership has to get out among the people, work with the people, listen to the people, and care for the people. And if you do the people will love you.

And also we see at the end of verse 16 that it wasn't just Nehemiah, it was **all** of Nehemiah's **servants** that also **gathered...for the work**. He took his whole cabinet out and they put on their work clothes and did the same work as the people. It was an administrative effort. Nobody was going to be above all the people. Everyone was going to identify with the people. Sure they had other things to do too but they were not going to isolate themselves from the people engaging in these other affairs, they also were going to put their hand to the masonry work and so forth in rebuilding the wall.

The third step Nehemiah and his kinsmen took to relieve the burden on the people is verse 17, he provided a lavish banquet each day. This was the customary lavish banquet Persian governors held each evening. So while verses 15-16 may have led you to believe that Nehemiah didn't have this banquet that conclusion would be wrong. He continued to have the banquet he simply didn't exact taxes from the people to pay for it. Instead he paid for it all himself. **Moreover, there were at my table one hundred and fifty Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us.**¹⁸**Now that which was prepared for each day was one ox and six choice sheep, also birds were prepared for me; and once in ten days all sorts of wine were furnished in abundance. Yet for all this I did not demand the governor's food allowance, because the servitude was heavy on this people.** This, of course, was a lot of food and wine. To pay for all of it would require that Nehemiah be a very wealthy man. And thus you see that the office of cupbearer was not too shabby a position to hold in the Persian government. We know it was a very sensitive position and as such it was a very high salary position. And out of his wealth he provided a lavish banquet each day for twelve years to relieve the burden of the **people**.

You see the amount of food and wine provided **each day** in verse 18 was **one ox and six choice sheep, also birds** and one out of every **ten days** a vast assortment of **wine** was provided **in abundance**. This amount of food was sufficient for 400-600 people and so each day he must have entertained a

large guest list. This would give him favor both among the people and among the surrounding nations. Of course, not every leader would be capable of providing this kind of service to the people but seeing that he had the assets he did so and this relieved some of the heavy burden on the people

Now after mentioning these three things we come to verse 19 where we see that Nehemiah's main audience all along has not been the people or us. He has been telling God what he had done to relieve the people's burden and so he says in prayer to God, **"Remember me, O my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people.** He looked forward to being rewarded for his service to the people. This is another leadership principle; the godly leader will be looking to store up treasure in heaven, not on earth. Nehemiah understood that the eternal far outweighs the temporal and therefore he lived in the present for the people so that he would be rewarded in the future by His God. He says, **Remember me, O my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people.**

Now we come to chapter 6 and here we find the enemy's tactics against Nehemiah himself. One of the tactics of Satan is to cause the leader of an organization to fall because if you can knock off the leader the whole organization will fall. It's what they call in the military, force concentration. All the energy will be concentrated on a portion of the enemy force, in this case the chief leader and by destroying him everyone who follows him is left without a leader and disperses in defeat. And so here they are using force concentration as the next tactic and Nehemiah is the target. Three avenues are employed by the enemy to kill Nehemiah and take him out of the picture. First, verses 1-4, a meeting in the plain of Ono, **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, 2 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.** In other words, Nehemiah detected that this was an assassination plot. For one the **plain of Ono** was about 25 miles away from Jerusalem and thus more than a day's journey from Jerusalem. Why meet way out in the **plain of Ono** when they could just as well meet in Jerusalem? To be sure he was correct verse 3, **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?" That is, I'm busy here so if you really want to meet you can come to Jerusalem and meet, that way I can continue to oversee this great work. Their response would reveal their true motives.

Verse 4, so, **They sent messages to me four times in this manner, and I answered them in the same way.** Through this process it became obvious that his suspicions were true; they didn't want to simply have a nice meeting, they wanted to kill Nehemiah, they wanted to knock out the kingpin. So very patiently Nehemiah dealt in the same way with the same request, up to four times. There is another leadership principle embedded here. When the enemy persists sometimes we get tired and we give in, alright, fine, but Nehemiah remained steadfast and refused **in the same way** over and over and over. You have to be able to stick to your guns in leadership even when people press you and press you and press you, you can't cave in.

So with the enemies' failure to draw Nehemiah away from Jerusalem, in verse 5 we find the second avenue of attack, media pressure against Nehemiah. **Then Sanballat sent his servant to me in the same manner a fifth time with an open letter in his hand. ⁶In 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. ⁷"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."** Now he still wants to draw him out into the open so they can assassinate him, but this time he uses media pressure. There are several challenges to Nehemiah's character and motives in this so-called report that Nehemiah would surely want to contest. Nehemiah might be lured out by these tactics. One of the insidious aspects of the letter is that Sanballat makes it sound like he wants to protect Nehemiah from any harm that might come his way and yet he actually wants to harm him. So it's a very deceptive letter. A second insidious aspect of the letter is that Sanballat is trying to get Nehemiah to respond out of fear, out of fear for the king. And of course, when you respond out of fear you usually don't respond properly. So they are trying to frighten Nehemiah into making a bad decision and coming out to them for their help and then they would assassinate him.

So in verse 8 we get Nehemiah's response, **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."** ⁹**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.** First, in verse 8 he accuses Sanballat of having an overactive imagination. And in so doing he denies the media's reports. It's just not true, they are doing what so many media outlets do and that is blow things all out of proportion so they can turn nothing into something, always trying to stir up a frenzy. So it's just a very simple denial of the reports. That was all that was necessary. You guys sure have a fanciful imagination.

The purpose of this tactic Nehemiah caught as we can see in verse 9, **For all of them were trying to frighten us, thinking, "They will become discouraged with the work and it will not be done."** With all this media pressure floating around the Persian kingdom it could very well **discourage** them and bring the work to a halt. But Nehemiah recognized this ploy for what it was and recognizing it's dangerous effects he offers one of those short, spontaneous prayers like he did in chapter 2. **But now, O God, strengthen my hands.** That is, **strengthen my hands** to do the work, strengthen my hands to lead. All this can drain your strength and so as the enemy drains his strength he requests that God refill him with strength. All strength comes from Him so He can revive us, He can rejuvenate us to complete the work we need to do.

In verse 10 we have the third avenue of attack against Nehemiah. So far he has recognized two dubious attempts to draw him away from the work into harm's way. Finally we come to a third avenue. The enemy is relentless. He keeps chopping away at us trying to wear us out and dishearten us. It's what's happening in this country right now, it's what always happens in an organization when good is trying to prevail over evil. It seems the evil is overwhelming, it just keeps attacking and attacking and attacking and it gets very exhausting so we have to keep our guard up. So the third avenue of attack, this one is a false prophet. Verse 10, **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.” Now this man prophesies that the enemy is coming at night to assassinate him and so he suggests that for safety sake they go to the Temple as a safe room. Now this was the enemy working now from the inside. Sanballat has paid off this **Shemaiah** to be a false and lying prophet. The enemy wants to draw Nehemiah out at night time so midnight assassins can take him out and escape unnoticed. But Nehemiah knew the word of God and so let's see how he responded.

Verse 11, **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.”** ¹²**Then I perceived that surely God had not sent him, but he uttered his prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him.** ¹³**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.** In other words, Nehemiah noticed some things wrong with the prophet's words. Remember, the prophets were always to be tested. Deut 13 and Deut 18 set forth the tests for a prophet. And the pre-eminent test of a prophet was his words. His words have to line up with orthodoxy. He may do all kinds of signs and wonders but if his words were contrary to orthodoxy then that man was not to be listened to. The question is, would a prophet of God tell a non-Levite like Nehemiah to enter into the temple? Nehemiah says, **I will not go in.** He says it would be **sin** to go in. It was sin for any non-Levite to enter into the **temple**. Numbers 3:10, “the laymen who comes near shall be put to death.” Since a true prophet would not speak words contrary to orthodox Scripture then the enemy must have gotten to him and hired him. Shemaiah was a false prophet, a wolf in sheep's clothing; the attacks come from without and within. We must always be on guard. He would say what seems reasonable but Nehemiah measured everything against the word of God and this did not stand up to Scriptural scrutiny. Therefore he said **I will not go in.**

Further observation, there's almost the implication here that to act out of fear would be to act in sin. And it's true as John tells us in the NT, “perfect love casts out fear.” Fear is not a proper motive. The enemy would have us fear because fear leads to sin and stupidity. But Nehemiah had his guard up and so he rejected this plot

Finally, verse 14, after these three plots he goes to prayer once more.

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. In 5:19 he had prayed that God remember him for his good works. Now he prays that God would remember them for their works, those who tried to dissuade him from doing the will of God and rebuilding the wall. It is another imprecatory prayer, a prayer that God would return their evil upon their head. We gather here from the only mention of **Noadiah the prophetess** that there were others who claimed to be prophets and have a word from God that tried to frighten Nehemiah. We should never be frightened by the words of others, we should only be frightened by the words of the living God. We must discipline ourselves to resist the temptation of being frightened by the words of man. Sound leaders like Nehemiah resist these temptations.

At last we see in vv 15-19 the results of standing against all the avenues of enemy attack, against the taunting intimidations, the dangers of imminent attack, the rebellion and strife within and the incessant assassination attempts. Nehemiah withstood every leadership challenge that came his direction. He heard the taunts but he went straight to the Lord in prayer and called down justice on his enemies. He was threatened by attack and made tactical preparations, he detected fear in the camp and organized a motivational speech, he became angry but kept his cool and took time to collect himself and correct the situation, he was personally tempted to come out into the open multiple times but he recognized the deception, he was railed against by the media but he resisted these fear mongering tactics, he was tempted to sin but he would not be turned aside. And now at last, verse 15, **So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of *the month* Elul, in fifty-two days.** The walls were completed, the gates were completed, everything was completed, and the city of Jerusalem was now a fortified city above reproach, back on the map. The work only took **fifty-two days** and with all the obstacles they had to overcome in those few days it is apparent that God had been faithful in supplying them supernatural strength to complete the work. It was the providential work of God on their behalf. God's behind the scenes, secretive work that resulted in a supernatural event, not attended by all the bells and whistles of a miracle and yet quite obvious to all that something beyond mere mortal powers was at play in bringing about

such a result. The great and wonderful working providence of God. A mere **fifty-two days**.

Observe verse 16, **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.** They knew because it was impossible not to know, there was no other explanation for the speed of success. No group of people no matter how strong could accomplish such an immense task in a mere fifty two days with all the obstacles these enemies had thrown at them. So Nehemiah, trusting in his God and applying leadership skills oversaw one of the most remarkable building projects in the history of the world. This caused the enemies to **lose their confidence**. They had had the upper hand but now they had the upper hand no longer. Jerusalem was once again on the geopolitical map in preparation for the coming King-Messiah.

Verse 17, **Also in those days many letters went from the nobles of Judah to Tobiah, and Tobiah's letters came to them.** ¹⁸**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.** ¹⁹**Moreover, they were speaking about his good deeds in my presence and reported my words to him. Then Tobiah sent letters to frighten me.** Nehemiah's office was flooded with letters from **Tobiah**. As the name **Tobiah** suggests, he was related to the Jews. He had married a nice Jewish girl and lived among the Jews but was not in favor of the rebuilding project. He was involved in many successful business ventures with the **nobles of Judah** and so as they plotted by correspondence the result was that Nehemiah's desk was flooded with letters trying to frighten him from continuing the work. Probably this opposition is placed here after the wall was finished to reveal to us that in addition to all the other opposition we have seen Nehemiah was plagued with this constant barrage of letters from Tobiah. What do we learn from this? Leadership is never without its internal strife and personal alliances. They must come to the surface eventually and be dealt with, otherwise the enemy will prevail. They are a constant thorn in your side but they must either be put up with or dealt with.

Alright, what have we seen today? Two things. First, in 5:14-19 Nehemiah revealed the difference between his conduct based on the fear of God and the conduct of the nobles and other rulers toward their fellow Jews who did not fear God. They oppressed them by exacting usury but Nehemiah lowered their tax burden, worked on the wall with them and personally funded the daily banquets. Second, in 6:1-14 Nehemiah revealed that there were several assassination attempts on his life that he was able to avoid. First, Sanballat and the other enemies tried four times to lure Nehemiah out to the plain of Ono in order to assassinate him. Second, when this failed they raised media pressure by spreading lies about Nehemiah's purposes in rebuilding the city. Nehemiah resisted by responding that they had an overly fanciful imagination and turned to the Lord in prayer for strength. Third, they hired a Jew to falsely prophesy of an assassination plot that would require Nehemiah to make passage by night to the Temple for safety. Nehemiah resisted by perceiving that no true prophet of God would suggest that he take refuge in the Temple since he was not a Levite. During the entire project Tobiah and the nobles wrote numerous letters trying to frighten him from the work. However, Nehemiah's reliance upon God's strength enabled him to resist all these attempts and finish the wall in just fifty-two days. This amazing feat caused their enemies to lose confidence since it was apparent that their God had helped them.

In conclusion what can we learn? Well, there are many things. First, if you are in leadership and if you are God's man doing God's will then you are going to face obstacles. There are several if's in there that are all involved in the equation. If you are in leadership and if you are God's man doing God's will then you will face opposition. Satan doesn't want you to be successful. But if God is for you, who can be against you. One man and God is always a majority. Nehemiah feared God and because he feared God he enjoyed God's blessing and support through all the opposition. Second, in leadership you must lead by example. You cannot advise other people what to do but not follow your own counsel if you want to be successful. Nehemiah led by example and showed us how we ought to lead. Third, in leadership you must work alongside the people. You are not of some special class that is so high above all the other people that you can't get down with them and work alongside of them. Nehemiah had other administrative responsibilities but he got down with the people and built the wall with his own two hands. He showed us how we ought to lead. Fourth, in leadership you must fear God.

You will not be able to stand up to the pressures of temptation unless you truly fear God. Nehemiah feared God such that he did not exercise the right of exacting taxes to pay for the daily banquets but rather chose to pay for them out of his own pocket for twelve years. In a sense it was this principle of fearing God that must guide all leaders in right decision making. A leadership that does not fear God is a leadership capable of terrible monstrosities against people. I think this principle more than any other is what is leading our nation down the tube. There is not the fear of God among our nation's leaders; there is the fear of tyranny among us who are the people. Fear of anyone other than fear of God leads to poor decision making. The fear of God is consciously living in the sight of God. If we take each step of each day cognizant that we are ever under the watchful gaze of Him then we will make decisions that honor him. This is what Nehemiah did and that is why we need more leaders like Nehemiah. Fifth, in leadership you must have a vision, something you want to accomplish. There will be opposition to godly vision. Be able to detect ploys and schemes to try to slow and halt your progress. Nehemiah had a vision to rebuild the wall and many who opposed him. He was skeptical of any attempt to dissuade him. He knew what he was doing was the will of God. So if you are a leader with vision be skeptical, watch people, listen to people, know people and especially know the word of God and then you will be able to detect those with harmful schemes and be able to resist them. Sixth, stay the course, persevere in the work until you are done, and never give up. Nehemiah and the people persevered and completed the wall in just fifty-two days. Those who opposed them were shocked at the success. So always stay the course, don't ever give up, run the race and finish the course. It will devastate Satan and your enemies.

ⁱ By application we should be well-attuned to the fact that Satan, our arch-enemy, will often try to intimidate us and dissuade us from progressing in the Christian life but we should meet this opposition with prayer and perseverance.

ⁱⁱ By application we should be aware of the fact that Satan has often escalated his attacks against Christians by waging physical persecution campaigns. But we should not allow this to discourage us from continuing to profess Christ.

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