

Defeating Discouragement

Nehemiah 4:1-23

"The Bible tells us to love our neighbors and to love our enemies," said G.K. Chesterton, "probably because they are generally the same people!" In the case of the Jews rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem, this was certainly true. In the course of this chapter, we come to find out that the people of Jerusalem are surrounded by hostile enemies on all sides—it is their neighbors who do their dead-level best to discourage the workers from continuing the task that God has called them to.

Let's read the account together.

4:1 But it so happened, when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, that he was furious and very indignant, and mocked the Jews.

2 And he spoke before his brethren and the army of Samaria, and said, "What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they fortify themselves? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they complete it in a day? Will they revive the stones from the heaps of rubbish; stones that are burned?"

3 Now Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, "Whatever they build, if even a fox goes up on it, he will break down their stone wall."

4 Hear, O our God, for we are despised; turn their reproach on their own heads, and give them as plunder to a land of captivity!

5 Do not cover their iniquity, and do not let their sin be blotted out from before You; for they have provoked You to anger before the builders.

6 So we built the wall, and the entire wall was joined together up to half its height, for the people had a mind to work.

7 Now it happened, when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites heard that the walls of Jerusalem were being restored and the gaps were beginning to be closed, that they became very angry,

8 and all of them conspired together to come and attack Jerusalem and create confusion.

9 Nevertheless we made our prayer to our God, and because of them we set a watch against them day and night.

10 Then Judah said, "The strength of the laborers is failing, and there is so much rubbish that we are not able to build the wall."

11 And our adversaries said, "They will neither know nor see anything, till we come into their midst and kill them and cause the work to cease."

12 So it was, when the Jews who dwelt near them came, that they told us ten times, "From whatever place you turn, they will be upon us."

13 Therefore I positioned men behind the lower parts of the wall, at the openings; and I set the people according to their families, with their swords, their spears, and their bows.

14 And I looked, and arose and said to the nobles, to the leaders, and to the rest of the people, "Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, great and awesome, and fight for your brethren, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses."

15 And it happened, when our enemies heard that it was known to us, and that God had brought their plot to nothing, that all of us returned to the wall, everyone to his work.

16 So it was, from that time on, that half of my servants worked at construction, while the other half held the spears, the shields, the bows, and wore armor; and the leaders were behind all the house of Judah.

17 Those who built on the wall, and those who carried burdens, loaded themselves so that with one hand they worked at construction, and with the other held a weapon.

18 Every one of the builders had his sword girded at his side as he built. And the one who sounded the trumpet was beside me.

19 Then I said to the nobles, the rulers, and the rest of the people, "The work is great and extensive, and we are separated far from one another on the wall.

20 "Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us."

21 So we labored in the work, and half of the men held the spears from daybreak until the stars appeared.

22 At the same time I also said to the people, "Let each man and his servant stay at night in Jerusalem, that they may be our guard by night and a working party by day."

23 So neither I, my brethren, my servants, nor the men of the guard who followed me took off our clothes, except that everyone took them off for washing.

PRAYER

How we deal with adversity says more about our character than most anything else. You want to know what a person is really like? Watch them when things go wrong; when they are imposed upon; when they are made to wait; when someone cuts them off in traffic; when they are tired and achy. Some people whine while other people shine. Some people learn from their situation, while others burn with resentment. We can learn a whole lot from Nehemiah about how to deal with discouragement in the work of God.

Reasons for Discouragement:

1. Ridicule: 1-3

"When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, that he was furious and very indignant." Sanballat is ticked off. Remember, Sanballat is a governor of a nearby territory. He was afraid that a strong Jerusalem would emerge as a threat to his territory. Now that it is obvious that these Jews are serious about the project, Sanballat is steamed about it. And so he resorts to the tool of a loser: ridicule! Thomas Carlyle said, *"Ridicule is the language of the devil."* The Bible tells us that Satan is a liar and an accuser of the brethren. It is his business to deceive and discourage. Make no mistake about it: while Sanballat and Tobiah might have been the mouthpieces, Satan was the one who was behind this!

Ridicule can be effective. Some people who will stand bravely when shot at will cower meekly when laughed at, and that is what we see these enemies of God doing, all within earshot of the workers on the wall:

A. Belittled their Qualities. "What are these feeble Jews doing?"

Sanballat, who was a thoroughly worldly man, had no concept of work which would be done with the glory of God being the primary motive. He says to his buddies that these Jews are attempting something foolish with the aim in mind of power or profit—because power, profit, and pleasure are the motivations of worldly people; they can hardly understand any other motive.

B. Derided their Ambitions. “Will they fortify themselves?”

C. Mocked their Religion. “Will they offer sacrifices?”

What he is saying here, most likely, is a taunt that goes something like this: “do they think that they can pray that wall up? Do they believe that their devotion to their God will make the wall magically rise from the rubble?”

D. Laughed at their Enthusiasm. “Will they complete it in a day?”

“Don’t they know that they’ve bit off more than they can chew? That wall has been a heap of rubble for a hundred years and it would take a hundred years to fix it!”

E. Undermined their Confidence

“Will they revive the stones from the heaps of rubbish; stones that are burned?”

“What fools those Jews are to imagine that they can dig through the rubble and find stones strong enough, and then that they can actually construct a sturdy wall from this mess!” And the implication is “No, they don’t have a chance!”

Then in verse 3, his buddy Tobiah makes a joke, suggesting that even the light footsteps of a fox would be enough to knock the wall down. They all had a great laugh at the workers’ expense.

Our Lord Jesus know what it feels like to endure ridicule. Throughout His ministry many had mock and derided Him, the worst coming on the day of His death. Matthew writes that the soldiers, **“When they had twisted a crown of thorns, they put it on His head, and a reed in His right hand. And they bowed the knee before Him and mocked Him, saying, ‘Hail, King of the Jews!’”** (Mat 27:29 NKJV). Even while He was hanging on the cross, dying for you sins, and mine, they mocked Him saying,

“You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” Likewise the chief priests also, mocking with the scribes and elders, said, **“He saved others; Himself He cannot save. If He is the King of Israel, let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe Him. He trusted in God; let Him deliver Him now if He will have Him; for He said, ‘I am the Son of God.’”** Even the robbers who were crucified with Him reviled Him with the same thing.

Ridicule can be very discouraging. Aren’t you glad we have a Savior who can understand what we are going through? Let’s look at another source of discouragement:

2. Threats: 7-8

Now all their neighbors come together against them. Verse 8, **“All of them conspired together to come and attack Jerusalem and create confusion.”**

Now these enemies determine to go beyond ridicule; they make a show of force. We’re not sure if they were actually making plans of attack or if they were just saber-rattling. We do know that from every direction the people in Jerusalem could look and see enemies, ready to attack.

3. Discouragement: 10-12

The ridicule and threats of the enemy result in discouragement for the workers. One of the things that is true in any work we undertake for God is that we are naïve if we expect everything to be just hunky-dory all the time. Ministry is hard work, and there is plenty of frustration. God's people can easily become discouraged and burned out when we start listening to the enemy instead of listening to God. Notice the things we see happening in verses 10-12:

A. Fatigue

"The strength of the laborers is failing." These folks were dog-tired. They were worn out. It's easy to get discouraged when you are tired.

B. Frustration

"... and there is so much rubbish that we are not able to build the wall." I imagine that the things they'd heard Sanballat and Tobiah saying were beginning to register, to have the dastardly effect intended by Satan. At the halfway stage, there was a sinking of heart. A lot of folks were seeing the glass as half-empty!

It's easy for us to get focused on the negative. It's easy for us to believe the naysayers. It's easy for us to look at our weakness rather than God's strength! In the history of the church, pessimism has been a greater obstacle to the work of God than atheism! Would Nehemiah's builders succumb to the temptation of negativity?

Now the people of Jerusalem were tired and frustrated. What would happen? Would they give up and go home and say, "well, we gave it a shot—but the job was beyond us. We just couldn't do it!"

C. Fear

Not only are they bone-weary and beginning to doubt their abilities, but what's more, they're afraid. According to verses 11-12, the people from Judah came up to the workers again and again with words of concern and fear.

Fear is paralyzing, and fear is contagious! And there was enough of it to go around. What a burnout cocktail we have: fatigue, frustration, and fear are enough to do in many a project!

Dr. Seuss can help us here, he writes...

Did I ever tell you about the young Zode
Who came to two signs at a fork in the road?
One said "To place One," and the other "Place Two"
So the Zode had to make up his mind what to do.

Well, the Zode scratched his head and his chin and his pants
And he said to himself, "Now I'll be taking a chance...
To go to Place One. That place may be hot.
How do I know if I'll like it or not.
On the other hand, though, I'll feel such a fool
If I go to Place Two and find it's cool.

"Play safe," cried the Zode. "I'll play safe, I'm no dunce
I'll simply start off to both places at once."
And that's how the Zode who would not take a chance

Got to no place at all with a split in his pants.

So how does Nehemiah respond to his discouraged workers? Nehemiah is facing the greatest test of his leadership; if he fails to act decisively, wisely, and effectively, he might retain the title of governor, but his leadership of the people will be over; the wall will not be rebuilt; and the glory of God will still suffer. What does he do about it?

Responses to Discouragement:

1. Prayer :4-5, 9a

Disaster looms if nothing is done. But if we have learned one thing about Nehemiah it is that he is a man of prayer. And as we might expect by now his first response is to turn to God! He calls upon God for help! There is a brutal honesty in this prayer, so much so that we might be taken aback by it. He prays,

Hear, O our God, for we are despised; turn their reproach on their own heads, and give them as plunder to a land of captivity! Do not cover their iniquity, and do not let their sin be blotted out from before You; for they have provoked You to anger before the builders. (Neh. 4:4-5).

In the light of the cross and our understanding of God's desire that all people come to him, we generally do not pray in this way—and I'm not so sure that we are wrong. But at the same time, I am not so certain that Nehemiah was wrong to pray in this way; for one thing, he saw these people as opposing the work of God. These enemies were not merely opposing Nehemiah; they were opposing God. This made Nehemiah indignant because of his zeal for the glory of God! C.S. Lewis noted that, in some circumstances,

The absence of anger is a most alarming symptom and the presence of indignation may be a good one. For if we look at their railings we find they are usually angry not simply because these things have been done to them but because these things are manifestly wrong, are hateful to God as well as to the victim.

Nehemiah goes to God with his outrage, though; these people are attempting to discourage God's people in God's work and Nehemiah recognizes that before anything else, this is God's problem!

I remember the little chorus we sang as kids, "I've Been Redeemed", and one line of it said, "You can talk about me, all that you please; I'll talk about you down on my knees!" That's good advice, and it is just what Nehemiah did.

He prays again prior to taking action in verse 9. Nehemiah understands the important balance between prayer and planning. Nehemiah must depend on God, and he must make plans. Throughout the book there is a consistent order: "we prayed, and then we..." **"we made our prayer to our God, and ... we set a watch against them."**

2. Perseverance :6, 15

Notice this important phrase in verse, **"the people had a mind to work."** Sure, their minds were assaulted by the relentless ridicule; their bodies were physically dealing with the effects of exhaustion. Fear played tricks with their minds, and they struggled with the enormity of the task. But they had a mind to work! Their heart was in it.

Verse 15 says, **“all of us returned to the wall, everyone to his work.”** Verse 21 says, **“So we labored in the work.”** In fact, we see in verse 21 a redoubling of their efforts: **“until the stars appeared.”** Quitting time would normally be sunset, but they worked later than that to get the job done! There was an urgency in the work. A great old gospel song is *“Work for the Night is Coming”*, and it calls us to an urgency in the work of the Lord. We have all eternity to rest, you know! The trite but true old saying goes like this: “Only one life, ‘twill soon be past; only what’s done for Christ will last!”

Did they face discouragement? Yes. But they found in persistence to be a significant part of the answer. This theme continues throughout the book—the people stuck with it. Years ago I read what Calvin Coolidge once wrote, and I saw it again recently. He said,

“Press on. Nothing can take the place of persistence. Talent will not. Nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not. Unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not. The world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are the overwhelming power!”

3. Planning :13, 16-20

Nehemiah took the concerns and fears of the people into account; he didn’t bash them or merely say “suck it up, men; don’t be such wimps!” Nehemiah carefully planned the deployment of the people. This included positioning a show of force at the most vulnerable points of the wall; a system of rallying the people together in the case of an attack; an organization of the people into a force that would be ready. Nehemiah created confidence because he was a guy who was concerned with careful planning and organization. He took the time to do things well and in an organized fashion, and I believe that that pleases God.

4. Positive Reinforcement :14

And I looked, and arose and said to the nobles, to the leaders, and to the rest of the people, "Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, great and awesome, and fight for your brethren, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses."

Nehemiah says two things here, and they are both important:

1. **“Remember the Lord”**. Different movements have been sustained by the rallying cry of “Remember!” In the Spanish-American War, it was “Remember the Maine!” In WWI, it was “Remember the Lusitania!” In Texas, it was “Remember the Alamo!” In WWII, the Pacific theater, it was “Remember Pearl Harbor!” But all of those were defeats remembered; here, it is “Remember the Lord!”, who is the Giver of victory.

Would the workers ever forget God? Would we? In the immediacy of a difficult situation, yes, we might! Paul urges Timothy, in II Timothy 2:8 (NIV), **“Remember Jesus Christ.”** Nehemiah continually remembered God, and he called his workers to do the same. Jesus Christ is the One who gives us victory. And we can get caught up in situations in life and in ministry, and even though we name the name of Jesus Christ and are God’s people, this is a word to us: **“Remember the Lord!”**

2. **“Fight”** is Nehemiah’s second word to the people. And he says, *“fight for your loved ones”*, if the need arises. If it comes to it, have the guts to fight. Listen church, we are engaged in a battle today with the Satan and the world. He has a death grip on many areas of our culture. And his purpose is to destroy the work of God, especially in our families. We need to be ready to fight for our families.

5. Preparedness :9b, 21-23

The workers were armed with building tools and weaponry at the same time. Spurgeon named his magazine *The Sword and the Trowel*, taking the title from Nehemiah 4 and saying that it would be a record of “combat with sin and labor for the Lord.” These people were serious about being prepared; they didn’t take off their clothes, Nehemiah said. As individuals and as a company, the builders and their servants were prepared for warfare and work.

We will never make a difference for God by doing nothing or by playing it safe.

Those that will confront the fear, and move forward regardless of the consequence will make the difference.