

Facing the Giant of Discouragement – Nehemiah Chapter 4

Introduction

Ill. There is an old legend that one day Satan had a garage sale. He was selling all his tools that he had used over the centuries. Lying, hatred, malice, lust, greed, envy, jealousy, pride, all these different things. Over in the corner there was one tool that was priced more than all the other tools put together. It was so priceless that nobody bought it. Why? Because it was “discouragement.” That’s Satan’s most important tool. And he’s still using it today.

Discouragement may just be Satan’s number one weapon.

Many Pastors who don’t have a problem with immorality or false doctrine, deal with discouragement in their ministry, because they see little growth and so few responses. There are teachers in the public school system who began with high ideals; they started with the ideal of being able to impart knowledge and guide lives, but somewhere along the line they got discouraged and lost their vision.

There are Christian Businessmen who start out with the ideal of establishing a business where they can make money and be generous, so they can hire godly people. But it doesn’t take long before they get discouraged and people don’t seem to appreciate what they’re doing, or salesmen jump ship and go with a competitor.

Parents want to rear their children to know the Lord, and then they become teenagers and start resisting and rebelling against authority, and parents get discouraged ...

If you ever got discouraged you’re in good company ... Moses got so disgusted with the children of Israel that he once said “God, just wipe them off the map.” Elijah got so discouraged with his responsibility he said, “Lord, just take my life, I’m the only prophet left in Israel.” Paul once despaired of life. Lincoln and Churchill and great leaders went through periods of despondency.

What is discouragement? Discouragement is kind of a loss of enthusiasm for a particular task. A feeling that an assignment is unattainable.

Nehemiah encountered discouragement. His responsibility was to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. But not everything went smoothly.

Look at Nehemiah, the 4th chapter. I want to look at two verses to begin with, verse 6 and verse 10 ... verse 6 ...

6 So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart. Neh. 4:6

... The people worked with all their heart ... now look down at verse 10

10 Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, "The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall." Neh. 4:10

... The strength of the laborers is giving out. What in the world happened between verse 6 where the people worked with all their heart and verse 10 where the people's strength began to give out and they lose heart? What caused this discouragement and how did Nehemiah deal with that?

That's what we want to study and I think it will be a help to you if you encounter discouragement in your life. Now one of the causes of discouragement was the fact that there was opposition ... Look at verse 7 ...

I. Opposition

7 But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the men of Ashdod heard that the repairs to Jerusalem's walls had gone ahead and that the gaps were being closed, they were very angry. 8 They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. Neh. 4:7-8

If you encounter criticism and opposition, it can be discouraging no matter how noble your task. It's doubtful that we will have opposition physically like Nehemiah had. People will attack your perspective, or your decisions, or ridicule your values, or be critical of your attitude, and it can be discouraging. Sometimes the criticism that discourages can come from members of your own family, and those close to you. And it hurts and it discourages.

If you're going to undertake anything significant for God, then criticism and opposition are inevitable.

There is no such thing as opportunity without opposition. It's been said that if you're going to carry the ball, you're going to get tackled.

And we have to anticipate in life that if we attempt anything great for God there is going to be opposition. We can't give in to discouragement. Another reason for discouragement is exhaustion. Verse 10 says...

II. Exhaustion.

10 Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, "The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall." Neh. 4:10

These people were getting tired. Verse 6 says...

6 So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart. Neh. 4:6

So many times when you get half-way through a project you get discouraged. Everyone works hard in the early stages of a new project. Anybody can get excited about something for a limited amount of time. But after the newness wears off you start to get tired and fatigued. And when you're tired, you're more vulnerable to discouragement. Vince Lombardi said...

"Fatigue makes cowards of us all." Vince Lombardi

Sometimes the most spiritual thing you can do in life is to take a break. Get some rest.

Let's take a look at 1 Kings, the 19th chapter. There's a story about Elijah.

Elijah had been a fugitive for three and a half years. There was a drought and a famine in the land. Then Elijah was called back by God to have a confrontation with the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel. He called down fire from Heaven. He slew all the prophets of Baal. Then Queen Jezebel said, "What you did to the prophets of Baal, I'm going to do to you." Now in 1 Kings, chapter 19, vs. 3 we read...

3 Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, 4 while he himself went a day's journey into the desert. 1 Kgs. 19:3-4

Now he's really physically exhausted, not just from all the experiences he's had leading up to this point, but he's run for two days into the desert and into the wilderness. Now look what happens.

He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, LORD," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." 1 Kgs. 19:4

He was just very discouraged. Look what the Lord does.

5 Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep. All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." 6 He looked around, and there by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again. 7 The angel of the LORD came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." 1 Kgs. 19:5-7

You see what the Lord did. Elijah was discouraged and some of it was physical. He just gave him a chance to eat and sleep, and eat and sleep, and he took a break. So sometimes when you're discouraged, it may be a physical problem and you need to get away. You need to have a vacation. You need to rest. Jesus would depart from the crowds and go to the other side of the lake, or apart into a mountain and withdraw to revitalize his energy. To be apart with God...God knows more about us than we do and He knows that when our bodies are tired, we're vulnerable and subject to discouragement. So sometimes the right thing to do is take a break.

We read that these people were discouraged...their energy was gone; they were exhausted. Another reason they were discouraged were distractions...Nehemiah 4:10

III. Distractions.

10 Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, "The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall." Neh. 4:10

There is so much rubble. You've been at a construction site and half way through there's so much debris around there's nothing attractive about it, it looks awful, and you lose vision of what the building or the wall is going to be like when you're finished. And you can get discouraged because of all the distractions and all the obstacles and all the rubble in your particular assignment.

I know people who have entered politics. They hope to be a Christian in politics. They're going to make so many changes. And then pretty soon they're saying, "There's so much rubble; so much special interest and lobbying and compromises. I just don't think I can accomplish much and they lose sight of their vision and that can be discouraging. Another reason these people were discouraged was because of pessimism...

IV. Pessimism.

We cannot build the wall. We just can't do it. You get around enough negative thinkers and it begins to discourage you. There are some people who are good Christians but they're thinking negatively all the time, no matter how good things are. There are some people that see negativism in everything. Now if those are your best friends and you're associating with negative people all the time, it begins to discourage you. No matter how good your circumstance, if you're around people who are negative all the time, eventually it can be discouraging to you and it can grind you down.

I've spend a lot of time teaching in the public school system. Some of you teachers know how difficult it can be to be a teacher because of negativism and lack of response. Here's an example of what it might be like if Jesus was teaching today.

Then Jesus took his disciples up into the mountain, and gathering them around Him He taught them saying...Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Then Simon Peter said, "Do we have to write this down?"

And Andrew said, "Are we supposed to know this?"

And James said, "Will we have a test on this?"

And Phillip said, "I don't have any paper."

And Bartholomew said, "Do we have to turn this in?"

And John said, "The other disciples didn't have to learn this!"

And Matthew said, "Can I go to the boy's room?"

And Judas said, “What does this have to do with real life?”

Then one of the Pharisees who were present asked to see Jesus’ lesson plan and inquired of Jesus, “Where is your anticipatory set and your objectives and the cognitive domain?” (And all the teachers applauded...)

Now if you’re around negativism and lack of response eventually you just throw up your hands and say, “Boy this is discouraging...I quit!” Then one other reason they were discouraged, and that is apprehension...or fear.

V. Apprehension.

11 Also our enemies said, "Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work." Neh. 4:11

Now either they had a spy among the enemies, or the enemies were deliberately circulating this rumor. “You don’t know when we’re going to attack, but just when you’re asleep or you don’t expect, that’s when we’re going to come in and we’re going to wipe you out.” And it bothered these people and they were apprehensive. They were discouraged. They were fearful. Verse 12 says...

12 Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, "Wherever you turn, they will attack us." Neh. 4:12

They kept repeating it...ten times over...again and again...they’re going to get us! There needs to be some sense of certainty in life. If you’re lacking this, it’s easy to become discouraged. If you’re not stable in life’s most important roles, your home, your church, your job, that’s fertile soil for discouragement.

III. Victor Frankl, author of the book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, was one of the Jews at the concentration camp at Auschwitz. He tells of one day that he was standing before the SS guards in the camp. They had stripped him of everything, stark naked, taking even his wedding ring. He said at that moment he realized they could take away every single thing in his life except for one thing. They could not take away his freedom to choose how he would respond.

So, how do we respond when we’re confronted by opposition? When we’re exhausted? How do we deal with the distractions that often discourage us? How do we handle the pessimism of others? How do we handle our own fear and apprehension? Let’s take a look at how Nehemiah responded...The first thing he did was he confronted the problem...

I. He Confronted the Problem.

13 Therefore I stationed some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families, with their swords, spears and bows. Neh. 4:13

Notice he didn't say, "Just ignore the problem. Don't worry about it. They'll never attack." He didn't procrastinate, just thinking it will go away. He didn't "spin" the issue to the people. He didn't stick his head in the sand. No. He took action. There had to be a confrontation. There needed to be an acknowledgment of the problem and a confrontation of the fears and concerns.

You know, many Christians are surprised that we are in a battle at all. Oh we can get totally energized about building God's Kingdom; about doing mighty exploits for God; onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war. But then when things start to go wrong; when the criticism comes, and the trials increase, and the battle gets heated and the going gets tough, they say, "Hey, wait a minute! It's not supposed to be like this!"

Oh really...read your New Testament! Read your Old Testament, for that matter. We are in a spiritual battle. This is war! Think about it. That's why we're given ARMOUR and WEAPONS. That's why Jesus said, "*Blessed are you when me revile you and persecute you and say all manner of evil against you falsely, on account of Me.*" That why Paul had his hands full with beatings and stonings, not to mention all the struggles and troubles of the churches. Real New Testament Christianity (if it's done right) is messy stuff. We are in a spiritual battle. This is warfare. R. G. Lee said...

"If you don't get up in the morning and meet the devil, you're just headed the wrong way." R.G. Lee

Every time you start building for God, you're asking for a battle. If you start trying to build your marriage, you're asking for a battle. If you start trying to build up your own personal spiritual life, you're asking for a battle. If you start trying to build up a church, that's a battle. Why? Because Satan doesn't want you or me or your neighbor or this church making any spiritual progress; making an impact for the Kingdom of God.

There needs to be an acknowledgement of the issue. So the first thing Nehemiah did was he confronted the problem. The next thing he did was he focused on the Lord. Verse 14...

II. He Focused on the Lord.

14 After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes." Neh. 4:14

Get you mind off the enemy and off your own inadequacy and onto the Lord. When you're under attack, if the devil can get you to focus on the opposition, he's won a major victory. And if he can get you feeling sorry for yourself, he's done even better. In Hebrews 12:2-3 we read...

2Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the

throne of God. 3Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. Heb. 12:2-3

You either focus on the opposition, you can focus on yourself, or you can focus on the Lord. If the Lord is in charge then we don't need to have any fear. Remember, if God is for us, who can be against us? I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. The Lord is my rock and salvation. Of whom shall I be afraid? When the enemy comes in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord will lift up a standard against him. Do not fear, for I am with you, do not anxiously look about you for I am you God...So there need be no fear. Because all things work together for good to those who love the Lord, to those who are called according to his purpose. And when you are discouraged, look to God. Corrie Ten Boom put it this way...

“If you look at the world, you'll be distressed. If you look within, you'll be depressed. But if you look at Christ, you'll be at rest.” Corrie Ten Boom

It all depends on what you have your eyes on. So Nehemiah said, “You focus on God, not your own discouragement.”

Another thing Nehemiah did is he gave them a new motivation. At the end of verse 14 he said...

III. He Gave Them a New Motivation.

14b... fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes." Neh. 4:14b

That's a new motivation; that's added incentive. How many of you know that you will do things for God and other people that you won't do for yourself. At the end of the day it's not all about you, is it? Sometimes you'll just quit, if you're all that matters.

In his book *Failing Forward* John Maxwell has a chapter title I like;

Get Over yourself...Everyone Else Has. - Failing Forward - John Maxwell

But you'll do things for your kids and family that you won't do for yourself. Nehemiah said, “You're not just doing this for yourself, you're doing this for the next generation.” That's the incentive, do it for others, that's a servant's heart. Nehemiah said, “Get your mind off the enemy, and get your mind off yourself, and get your mind onto serving your children and your wives and your family, and the people who matter, and those who are yet to come.”

And then he did a, maybe a surprising thing. He sent them back to work. Verse 15...

IV. He Sent Them Back to Work

15 When our enemies heard that we were aware of their plot and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to his own work. Neh. 4:15

There's a time to take a break and a time to go back to work. If we're not careful, discouragement can paralyze our efforts. It can make it difficult to find the motivation to work. But one of the best remedies to discouragement is to get busy again. I love this quote by Calvin Coolidge...

“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.” Calvin Coolidge

Paul put it this way...

One thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. Phil. 3:13-14

There is something about going ahead and doing the job, even though it's tedious, that's a whole lot better than, in Nehemiah's case, sitting around worrying and fretting about the enemy. There is a time to get back to work. That's one of the ways to overcome discouragement; get back to work.

And then he equipped them for their responsibilities. Look at verse 16...

V. He Equipped Them for Their Responsibilities.

16 From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armor. The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah 17 who were building the wall. Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other... Neh. 4:16-17

What did he do? He didn't send them out there defenseless. He said, “Everybody get a sword or a knife and put it on your person. I'm going to station some guards behind you so that you won't get stabbed in the back. But when you work you have your sword or your spear or your knife right at your side so that you're equipped to fight if they attack us.” These guys are going back to work and their attitude is picking up. He gave them equipment for their responsibility and their confidence picked up and it eliminated discouragement.

One of the surest way to discourage people is to give them responsibility and not train them for it; to give them an assignment and don't give the equipment or the resources to follow through. That's a sure formula for discouragement.

In the church we have to equip people. In Ephesians the 4th chapter, verse 11 we read...

11 It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers... Eph. 4:11

Five roles of leadership in the church. It doesn't say they were given so the leaders do all the work. What does it say? Look at the next verse...

12 To prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up... Eph. 4:12

The King James says to "equip" God's people. So our job as leaders is not to do all the work, but to equip you, and mentor you, and train you to build God's Kingdom and build up His church. Our task is to equip you with the word of God and specific training and resources and responsibility to follow through on the tasks God has called you to.

Another thing that Nehemiah did was he demonstrated involvement... Look at the last phrase of verse 18...

VI. He Demonstrated Involvement

18 ...and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked. But the man who sounded the trumpet stayed with me. Neh. 4:18

You get the picture there? Nehemiah said, "Look, if there is an attack anywhere at all around this wall, you will hear the sound of the trumpet." And to the trumpeter, "You stay by my side." And the people had this sense of assurance. Nehemiah was involved. The leader was there. He would take charge. He didn't just delegate, then get out of the way. Nehemiah was there and he was involved. If you're going to be a leader, you can delegate out, but the people need a sense that when there's a need, you're there.

And then Nehemiah provided fellowship; he unified the forces. Verse 19...

VII. He Unified the Forces.

*19 Then I said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "The work is extensive and spread out, and we are widely separated from each other along the wall.
20 Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!"
Neh. 4:19-20*

He said, "Whenever you hear the sound of the trumpet, don't go to battle. You come to where the trumpet is sounding and we'll join forces and fight together." Then later in verse 22 he says...

22 At that time I also said to the people, "Have every man and his helper stay inside Jerusalem at night..." Neh. 4:22

“Let’s stick together,” he’s saying. There’s strength in numbers. If you’re by yourself and you feel alone, that’s the seedbed for discouragement. It’s encouraging when you’re with other people. Hebrews 10:25 says...

Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Heb. 10:25

When we worship as Christian people, we worship to praise God, that’s vertical, but we also come together to encourage each other. There’s strength in numbers.

But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. Heb. 3:13

Think about this. As we encourage one another, it can actually reverse the process of the hardening of the heart!

Sometimes we get beat down in the world and we begin to think, I’m the only one who believes like this. I’m the only one who believes you ought to live a pure life, I’m the only one who believes the Bible is God’s word, I’m the only one who believes that Jesus is the hope of the world. But then you come to church and you realize, hey, I’m not the only one. There are some other people who believe that way. And we encourage one another just by coming here...

Elijah got so filled with despair he said, “Lord, just take my life, I’m the only prophet left in Israel who hasn’t bowed their knee to Baal.” The Lord said, “That’s not true Elijah, there are 10,000 who haven’t bowed their knee to Baal.” It’s encouraging to come into church and say, “Amen, we stand together...there are thousands who haven’t bowed their knee to Baal. So Nehemiah unified the forces.

One other thing he did was he increased the challenge...Look at what he said. Verse 22 says...

VIII. He Increased the Challenge

22 At that time I also said to the people, "Have every man and his helper stay inside Jerusalem at night, so they can serve us as guards by night and workmen by day." Neh. 4:22

and verse 21 says...

21 So we continued the work with half the men holding spears, from the first light of dawn till the stars came out. Neh. 4:21

They stayed on the job until the stars came out. We’re going to work harder than we’ve ever worked before. Nehemiah said, don’t be discouraged, you take a break, we’re going to equip you, we’re going to do it for our families, God’s going to be with us. But we’re

going to work harder than we've ever worked before. And you know what? They got this wall finished in 52 days, because they worked so hard. When the chips are down, people will respond to a challenge if they believe it has meaning. We sometimes think that the way to get people out of discouragement is to make life a whole lot easier for them; give them comfort and security. That's only temporary. The way to get people out of discouragement is to motivate them to a challenge. People respond to a challenge.

In the recent movie *Facing the Giants*, the Shiloh Eagles football team had not had a winning season in 6 years. As the new season begins, the Eagles lose their first three games due to their half-heartedness and apathy. Coach Grant Taylor challenges the players to give God their best effort...on and off the field. Let's take a look...

Movie clip: Facing the Giants/Wholehearted (5:00)

We respond to a challenge. Hannah Whithall Smith said...

"God is not looking for talented warriors. He's looking for shepherds who believe that, with God on their side, they can slay giants." Hannah Whithall Smith

As we close...I have discovered in my 49 years that, when it comes right down to it, there are really only two kinds of people in the world; those who love Star Trek and those who despise it. When I was in Junior High Star Trek re-runs were on every day at 4:00. I remember an episode where the Klingons and the crew of the Enterprise couldn't stop fighting. No matter what they tried, they would just get more and more angry. And if someone would die or get hurt, they would be miraculously restored to health, only to start fighting again. Come to find out, there was this alien creature (no surprise there) who lived off their negative emotions, who was manipulating all of this behind the scenes.

Ah, the morality of Star Trek...Isn't that the way we often are as Believers? The last thing Satan wants is for God's people to walk together in love and unity. So here Satan is pulling strings behind the scenes, hitting our hot buttons, and we fall for it, thinking the enemy is one another! Paul says...

"For our struggle is NOT against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." Eph. 10:12

You know one thing Nehemiah and the Children of Israel didn't do. They didn't turn against each other. If they had, the enemy would have won for sure. No, they knew who the real enemy was.

What about us? What's happening in our body? Let's not just get by. Let's not do small things. If it's for God and if it's for real, let's make a difference. Let's allow God to do big things through us. Let's respond to a challenge. Let's make our lives really count. Let's not just let the world fall apart around us without doing something. Let's respond to

the challenge, remembering that God is able to do immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine.

I guess it can all be wrapped up in Galatians 6:9...

9 Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Gal. 6:9