



October 5-6, 2019  
Pastor Mark Toone

## **For the City: Dealing with Discouragement** *Nehemiah 4*

We continue this evening/morning in our series “For the City.” God gave Nehemiah a vision to rebuild the broken walls of Jerusalem and restore the dignity of the city and of God’s people. By the way, guys, if all this talk of building walls and repairing gates is inspiring you, I have the perfect opportunity for YOU to raise your hand and say, “I’m in.” Next Saturday, October 12, is our Men’s Work Day. We would love to have 75 guys show up for breakfast at 7:00 am and then join together in tackling projects that need attention around the church. Serving once in this way might prime the pump for you to do the NEXT thing God wants you to do—beyond these walls. If you are interested, look for Elder Tom Gray after the service and get signed up. It will be great!

Last week I was on a pastors’ retreat. We met at Warm Beach Conference Grounds north of Everett. Here’s two things I learned: it’s not warm—and there is no beach. But other than that, it was exactly as advertised! It was a restful time of fellowship, but the first morning started a little rocky for me. I got into the shower and discovered shampoo in these ketchup packets. When I tried to tear open the packet in the shower, it was too slippery. So, I bit down on the corner of the packet, tore it open—and shot a wad of shampoo right into my mouth! That’ll wake you up!

When we turn to Nehemiah 4, we discover that the wall-builders are beginning to wonder if they’ve bitten off more than they can chew. Chapter 3 is the chapter of enthusiasm. The vision has been cast. The people have said yes. The work has begun. Forty-one teams are working shoulder to shoulder to accomplish this great work that will bless the city. Everyone starts the project with enthusiasm. Elisashib the High priest, Uzziel the goldsmith, Hananiah, the perfumer, Shallum and his daughters—even poor Malchijah who was assigned to rebuild the Dung Gate—which was a stinky and yucky as it sounded—all of them are pumped and ready to go.

Then comes chapter 4: the chapter of discouragement. Verse 6 says, “So we built the wall. And all the wall was joined together to half its height....” They are making progress. Halfway done! Which means what? They still have half to go! And they hit the halfway blues: that point between the enthusiasm of a new start and the excitement of “all done.” At the beginning of a project, you are brimming with energy and vision. And when the end is in sight, you get your second wind.

But the half way blues are real! Chapter 5 of my PhD thesis was the chapter my professor massacred; I began to lose heart. When I climbed Mt. Rainier it was the halfway mark when I looked up in the early morning darkness and saw the headlamps of climbers above of me that seemed to stretch into the heavens. I thought I’d never reach the top. Pastor Ellis tells me of what they call the “fifth-week blues” in Oxford; midway through the term, depression sweeps over the entire student body. Krista

Davis, one of our elders, has run five Boston Marathons. She says that hitting “the wall” is a real thing. At mile 20 of the 26-mile race, you really can’t imagine how you are ever going to finish.

The same is true in church life. The second half of Alpha is always harder than the first half. Classes in the spring are always harder to fill than classes in the fall. The last half of a capital campaign is always the toughest half. (By the way—our debt started at \$ 5.5 million; we are down to \$ 1.59 million—woo hoo! But we have to finish!)

Have you ever had the halfway blues? You start to peter out. You consider chucking it in? That’s why Paul speaks so often of perseverance; of never giving up. Near the end of his life, he was able to boast, “I have fought the good fight, I have *finished* the race...” Who cares whether you start the race? Anyone can start the race. It’s the one who *finishes*, Paul says, that gets the prize.

So why don’t we? Why do we so often pull up short? We get discouraged. Think about that word for a moment. *Dis-couraged*. The courage we once had gets dissed. It leaves us. Abandons us. We lose heart. Chapter 4 is a chapter of discouragement. At this halfway point, we find four reasons the wall-builders are tempted to give up: ***criticism, opposition, fatigue, and friendly fire.***

The chapter starts out with our old friends, the Guardians of the Rubble. We’ve met them twice already. These are the politicians from surrounding areas who don’t *want* Jerusalem restored. They like Jerusalem in rubble. It serves their selfish purpose. When they discover that Nehemiah really is moving ahead with his plans, they show up for the third time and begin to talk smack; dish out the ***criticism***. Nehemiah 4: 1-3.

*Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews. And he said in the presence of his brothers and of the army of Samaria, “What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore it for themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish up in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, and burned ones at that?” Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, “Yes, what they are building—if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall!”*

It’s no fun being mocked, criticized and belittled. If you have lived in a verbally abusive relationship, this sounds too familiar. The discouragers say, “You Jews are too feeble to rebuild this wall.” In other words, “You are insignificant.” The discouragers say, “You Jews aren’t really going to worship here. You’re going to rebel against the king.” In other words, “You are insincere.” The discouragers say, “You Jews can’t possibly finish this task on time.” impractical. “All your stones are burned and destroyed. You don’t have the resources.” inadequate. “If a fox stepped on this wall, it would tip over. You don’t know what you are doing.” Inept.

Insignificant, insincere, impractical, inadequate, inept. That about covers the gamut doesn’t it? How would YOU like to be working on a job with this chorus of criticism singing in the background? If you have, you know how discouraging it can be. But the Guardians of the Rubble don’t stop there. When their mocking doesn’t work, they resort to threats of ***opposition***. Verses 7-8.

*But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and that the breaches were beginning to be closed, they were very angry. And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it.*

If God uses you to bring blessing to your city—to rebuild broken relationships or broken institutions or broken people—you can be sure you will face opposition. It may come in the form of human enemies who oppose your efforts. Or it may be a spiritual assault. In the early weeks of our preparation for a church plant, Pastor Megan went into Port Orchard every Thursday, and EVERY Thursday, for weeks, she was sick. Every single Thursday for weeks she was afflicted. You’d almost think that there was something spiritual going on. And of course, there was!

We can never forget this: if we are going to be used by God to bring spiritual blessing, we will always be opposed in that effort by Satan. The Apostle Paul once warned his followers that “... we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” In other words, Paul says, we have a spiritual enemy who wants to harass and harrify you so as to hinder your God-given work. If you are trying to be used by God to bless your neighbor, bless your neighborhood, bless your city in some good way...*do not be surprised if you find yourself facing an assault: on your self-worth, on your body, on your marriage, on your children, at your work.* When it occurs, do not fail to consider that this might be a spiritual attack that can only be countered with spiritual warfare.

Criticism, opposition. Now comes a third reason for discouragement. **Fatigue.** Verses 10-11. *In Judah it was said, “The strength of those who bear the burdens is failing. There is too much rubble. By ourselves we will not be able to rebuild the wall.”*

Notice, now the wall-builders are grumbling. Their strength is failing. There is too much rubble. They are questioning whether they can finish the job. They are tired! Fatigue is one of the great discouragers in ministry. On this pastoral retreat, half of the day was devoted to rest. And most of us took naps. Many of us never take naps, but we were given permission. I spoke to a young pastor who just got married and asked, “How do I balance my married life with my work life?” I asked, “Do you take a day off?” He said, “No, not really!” I said, “Start there. If you do not learn how to take a weekly Sabbath where you and your wife can rest together, you will *never* balance your ministry-life and your family life.” If you are persistently tired, I don’t care what good things you intend to do for God; you will be discouraged—and less effective.

And finally, the wall-builders were discouraged by **friendly fire.** Verse 12. *At that time the Jews who lived near them came from all directions and said to us ten times, “You must return to us.”*

It wasn’t enough that the “Guardians of the Rubble” were criticizing their work. Now, their family and friends were laying on a barrage of discouragement. Ten times, we are told. In other words, over and over again, they were hearing from those closest to them that they ought to give up this crazy dream. If you have family or friends who are not believers or are nominal believers...*they may find your devotion to God’s call to be crazy. Or excessive. Or obsessive.* If you’ve ever tried to do what God was asking of you—and were hit by friendly fire, you know how discouraging that can be.

See what I mean? These people are trying to obey God; trying to bless their city; trying to sacrifice and serve in a way that will make a difference. And they are being shot down at every turn. And yet they persist. How? How do we take the “dis” out of discouragement? How do we recover vision, energy, stamina, and finish what God has placed before us? Well, we find a repeated theme in chapter four. Let’s call it this *Divine Partnership*. What do I mean by that? I mean that in every instance of discouragement mentioned, the wall-builders are reminded that this work is not their own; that they are in a Divine Partnership with the Lord God Almighty.

I want to be careful with this. God doesn’t *need* us to do anything. But the fact is, God has *chosen* to invite us into mission with himself. Into a kind of partnership. God has privileged us with the chance to play a significant role in the work he wants to do to bless the city and the world. *It is a balancing act*. We can’t throw up our hands and say, “God, you do it.” Because God has invited us to play a part. Nor can we say to the Lord, “I’ve got this,” because we don’t! We cannot possibly do it on our own and if we try, we continue to live in discouragement. But if we find that balance—playing our God-given part—and trusting God to play his—we can do more than we imagine.

I remember as a little boy of six driving to the dump in the Ahtanum area of Yakima. I loved to go to the dump. Because when we reached the dirt road, dad would say, “Okay, crawl over here.” I’d climb into his lap, and I got to drive the car! Of course, I wasn’t driving it by myself. Dad was working the pedals and he would sneak his thumbs down to realign the wheel as necessary. (By the way, every time I saw him touching the wheel I’d protest, “Dad, I’ve got this!”) And I did! My hands were on that wheel—with my Dad’s permission—I was driving that car!

Every time we find discouragement in this chapter, we are reminded of the divine partnership between God and his people. God still has his thumb on the wheel, but he is letting us drive the car! After Sanballat and the boys talk smack, Nehemiah immediately breaks into prayer! And then they start to build. They pray... and they build. God’s part; their part. When Sanballat and Tobiah threaten to attack them, we read this in verse 9: “*And we prayed to our God... and set a guard as a protection against them day and night.*” They prayed...and then they set a guard. God’s part—their part.

In verse 14 when Nehemiah sees that his people need a pep talk, he says, “Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes.” Do you see it? “Remember the Lord who is great and awesome—**(God’s part)**—and fight for your family!” **(Their part).**”

And one more time in verse 18: *And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built. The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me. And I said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, “The work is great and widely spread, and we are separated on the wall, far from one another. In the place where you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us.”*

Nehemiah kept the trumpeter near him so that if at any time one section of the wall began to fail against an attack, the trumpet could be sounded and the people would rally to that sight. That was their part. But notice the last few lines: “Our God will fight for us.” God’s part. So, which is it? Are the

people going to rally, pull their swords from their belt and defend their city? Or is God going to fight them? Yes! *Divine partnership.*

Think about those goofy apostles of Jesus who failed him at every turn and right up to the end. They were Jesus' *only* plan to spread his gospel throughout the world. He had no backup plan. They *had* to do their part. But it was only when the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost that they were empowered and gifted to do what they could not possibly do on their own. Go make disciples. Their part. I will be with you—forever. God's part.

If we don't raise our hand and say, "God, I'm in! I want to be used by you to bless my city, my neighborhood...", then apparently, remarkably...there will be things left undone. Lives left untouched. God's mission actually counts on us. Wow. But if we take on that mission and begin to believe that it depends *only* upon us, we will become discouraged, wearied, harried, and harassed. *The secret to persevering in our mission is to constantly recall that we are not on our own.* That we are in a divine partnership—by invitation of God—to rebuild his broken world. We pray to God, and we build. We trust God and we post a guard. We fight against what is evil and broken in this world and we watch as God fights for us.

This is so crazy, this divine partnership. But from Moses to Isaiah to David to Jesus, it is the same message: Go—and I am with you. If you don't go, you miss out on a partnership in God's mission. If you don't pray and trust God, you become a frazzled stress case. But if you can find that balance—you have the joy of playing a part in God's redemption mission to the world. How cool is that!

One last thing: I want you to remember three numbers. 1-4-3. Say them. You will hear more about it in the weeks to come, but 1-4-3 is our next step in blessing our city. We want you to take those people outside of our church that you have been noticing—and pick three of them. And commit to be *for* them. You: one—for—three. 1-4-3. This would mean that you become familiar enough with their lives that you can celebrate their successes, grieve their losses, rally to their side when they are in need. You will hear more about this; I'm not asking anything of you today. But I want you to remember those numbers. 1-4-3. You will hear more later.