

Glitches in the Program

Nehemiah 4

A young paratrooper was given these instructions: First, jump when you are told; second, count to 10 and pull the ripcord; third, in the unlikely event that it doesn't open, pull the second chute; and fourth, when you get down, a truck will take you back to base.

The plane ascended up to the proper height, and the young paratrooper jumped. He counted to 10 and pulled the cord, but the chute failed to open. He proceeded to the backup plan. The second chute also failed to open. "That's great," he thought. "And I'll bet that when I hit the ground, the truck won't be there either."

When a few things go wrong, it is human nature that we become discouraged and think that everything must be going wrong. To this point in the book of *Nehemiah*, everything pertaining to the author's plan to build a wall around Jerusalem has worked out perfectly. But, in our text this morning, we see the other side of the coin. Real life dictates that nothing great is ever accomplished without the necessity of overcoming assorted roadblocks and pitfalls.

Nehemiah's heart burned over a great need that existed back in his homeland, but as a servant to the king of the Medo-Persian empire, he was powerless to do anything about the situation apart from the king's blessing. So, he prayed for the king's favor and left the matter in God's hands.

Four months later, God opened doors. Nehemiah was able to share with King Artaxerxes his heart's desire to journey to Jerusalem and rebuild its walls. God answered Nehemiah's prayers beyond what he could have ever hoped for. Artaxerxes gave Nehemiah the title of governor and sent him to Jerusalem with the necessary credentials and authorization to begin the work.

Nehemiah inspected the walls and secured a sense of the scope of the task. He shared his plan with the people and they rapidly jumped on board. Many could see the danger and disgrace of Jerusalem. Nehemiah was just the catalyst to get them started. Last week, we studied chapter 3, which was a bit of a dry read, but it did portray a city alive and regenerated by a shared cause.

Of course, seldom does a man's life bound forward without a hitch here and there. And, seldom does a church or any other great cause in God's kingdom proceed smoothly without encountering obstacles along the way. *Chapter 4* of *Nehemiah* is filled with such obstacles. In spite of the clear evidence of God's hand upon this wall-building project, angry and threatening enemies surrounding Jerusalem were actively doing whatever they could to undermine the work.

In the Lord's work, there are times when one thing after the next seems to go badly. Leith Anderson writes: "Most things that discourage me are dwarfed by some new problem within seventy-two hours." But, we also need to recognize that the obstacles Nehemiah encountered cannot simply be explained as glitches. Nehemiah was doing God's work, and spiritual enemies are always actively attempting to undermine God's work. In fact, persistent onslaughts of threat and intimidation would begin to wear down the participants in this work, forcing Nehemiah to enact measures to ensure the safety of the people and to encourage them in their labors.

Constant spiritual attacks and disappointments can drain the energy of our Christian service and cause our fellowship to fly apart. I am strengthened to know that there is hope and renewal to be anticipated whenever God's people recognize that it is a spiritual enemy that seeks to do them harm, but that God is for them. Seeing these things, they cease flying apart, they reexamine the great shared causes of their lives together, they pull together in unity and they resume the work.

I. Resisting Ridicule (1-6)

A. Resistance to God's Work Often Begins Subtly

¹When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews, ²and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said, "What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble – burned as they are?"

³Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, "What they are building – if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones!" – Nehemiah 4:1-3

Sanballat was a Samaritan, and Tobiah the Ammonite seems to be his underling. Sanballat was probably an appointed governor over his people in the same way that Nehemiah was governor over the Jews. Sanballat and Tobiah first appeared in chapter 2:10 where they were described as "very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites." So long as Jerusalem's walls were a mess, these neighbors were able to wield influence in the city. In chapter 2:19, the two appear again with Gesham the Arab. Together, they mock and ridicule Nehemiah's plan to fortify Jerusalem, and they threaten to report him to the king.

In the meantime, the trio must have learned that Nehemiah was working with the king's blessing, so reporting him would be useless. Sanballat resorted to ridicule. He mocked the Jews to his army, but somehow, information was making its way to Nehemiah, which may be just what Sanballat wanted. He attacked their strength and intelligence, calling them "those feeble Jews." He attacked their silly faith: "Will they offer sacrifices?" He attacked the size of the task. "There's too much rubble. Those limestone blocks are calcified and brittle from when the Babylonians first burned the walls down. There's too much damage to ever recover!" Tobiah, Sanballat's toady, chipped in: "And boss, even a fox could knock it over! Right, boss, right?"

Sanballat attacked the Jews just as Satan often attacks Christians today – psychologically. I'd like to say that this strategy of ridicule had no impact on the people in the city just as I'd like to say that it has no impact on Christians today, but it does. We don't like being called foolish, superstitious or pitiful. I recall a governor/wrestler from Minnesota who said: "Organized religion is a sham and a crutch for weak-minded people," but he was hardly the first to say such things

The gospel of the cross that earned the Apostles a reputation for being "fools for Christ" does not track well in today's marketplace with its emphasis on meekness, death to self, surrender and suffering. Jerusalem under Nehemiah found the resolve to stand boldly in the face of ridicule. A similar boldness for the essence of the Gospel in the face of world opinion often seems lost today, as though the promise of Heaven alone just isn't quite enough of a prize, so every other promise conceivable is tacked on.

"Let's - all of us - decide to stop trying to convince the world that Christianity is true because Jesus makes us prettier, happier, thinner, wealthier, bigger, more successful, more popular, healthier, stronger, and more influential than everyone else. Do we actually believe that the world is impressed with our fancy new churches, 12,000 in Sunday School, five services each morning, the "millions" who are watching on television, converted beauty queens and professional athletes, our book sales, or our crusades? The world is laughing at us - mocking us and the Jesus we supposedly are serving."

- Mike Yaconelli in *The Door* (Sept./Oct.1989). *Christianity Today*

B. Nehemiah Prayed a Kingdom Prayer

Again, information flowed back to Nehemiah. Jews living to the north of Jerusalem in proximity to Sanballat's territory will later be found reporting on Sanballat's intentions and again, perhaps, Sanballat wanted the information to flow. Ridicule that never made it back to the Jews would have little chance of intimidating them. Nehemiah knew his enemies' intentions and he prayed:

⁴Hear us, O our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. ⁵Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders. – Nehemiah 4:5, 6

We have noted that Nehemiah was a man of prayer, but some commentators question how useful of a pattern for the New Testament believer this particular prayer is. After all, we are told to love our enemies. Nehemiah, on the other hand, is heard to be praying: "Do 'em in, Lord."

Now it is true that we are to lead with love and not vengeance, and it is true that loving our enemies is a New Testament prescription for either thwarting their plans or bringing them to repentance. But Nehemiah's prayer needs to be understood in light of the fact that he was clearly doing the work of God and his enemies were clearly trying to thwart that work. Today, we need to recognize that while our battle is not against flesh and blood, there are powerful and malevolent spiritual forces at work all the time seeking to tear down the church of Jesus Christ.

The early church was devoted to the apostle's doctrine, but the spiritual enemies of God delight in the biblical ignorance of God's people. The early church was devoted to fellowship. God's enemies thrive on discord. The early church was devoted to the breaking of bread; meals, in the midst of which, the sacrificial work of Jesus was memorialized. How God's enemies rejoice when the church seems to be about everything but the atoning work of Jesus. The early church was devoted to prayer. How Satan loves to sidetrack God's people from praying together.

Nehemiah's prayer was a bit severe for our tastes, but he recognized authentic conflict. Jesus said that the gates of Hell could not prevail against the church He would build. We should always pray for the health, purity and oneness of the church, but there is nothing out of bounds in praying for the failure of every effort, human or satanic, deliberate or simply careless that seeks to harm it.

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

II. Facing Fears (7-15)

A. The Enemy Became More Desperate

Ridicule proved inadequate. The work progressed and the wall reached half of the height that it would need to be. So, Sanballat and Tobiah found allies from a number of surrounding tribes and nations. Together, they plotted to disrupt the work on Jerusalem's walls. Again, news of this conspiracy made its way back to Nehemiah, and the governor acted: "But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat" (Nehemiah 4:9).

B. Some within the Community Began to Lose Heart

It was prudent to pull some of the laborers away from the work and to use them as sentries, but there was a downside. The remaining laborers grew weary. Progress must have slowed down somewhat. And, even though the threats and ridicule levied by Sanballat and Tobiah never seemed to have even phased Nehemiah, it did begin to take a toll on some of the workers:

¹⁰Meanwhile, 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."

¹¹Also 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."

¹²Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, "Wherever you turn, they will attack us." - Nehemiah 4:10-12

Discouragement had infected the camp. The threat on the outside may not have been as severe as the loss of courage on the inside. The Jews who lived near Sanballat, who may have been the conduits of information to Jerusalem all along, now began to harp on the situation. The phrase "ten times over" could easily be rendered "over and over again." "They're gonna get us!" "They're gonna get us!" "They're gonna kill us all!" "They're really gonna get us!" The threats and the constant discouragement were taking their toll in terms of negativity and faithlessness.

Vigilance is valuable, but how much of a steady diet of threats and bad news can a group of people take? There is no wisdom in denying real dangers and real problems, but there is always great value in remembering that even when problems are as real as they can be, God is for us. I think of a boat tossed about on Lake Galilee. Seasoned fishermen feared for their lives. But, the One Who was with them was powerful to speak peace to the storm. He still is. Christ is with His church. He is for His church. He is greater than any storm we have faced so far or ever will face.

C. A Dramatic Response

Nehemiah faced a tough choice. Even if it meant suspending the work for a few hours, Jerusalem needed a show of strength. At the low spots of the wall, where they would be visible to the gathering foe, heavily armed families stood as if too defiantly say to Sanballat, "Bring it on!" This was not a gamble of false bravado. The reason they were assembled as families was to reinforce how much was at stake. Most importantly, the people were instructed: "Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome ..." (Nehemiah 4:14).

When push comes to shove, we either fear men more than we fear God, or we will revere and trust God more than we fear men. Jerusalem trusted God. The great battle never materialized. The enemy saw the resolve of a unified city and walked away. The Jews each returned to their assigned places at the wall. The text says that God "frustrated" the plans of His enemies, but it does not tell of any miracle or of any spectacular battle plan that He disclosed to Nehemiah. God simply placed His people in a position to either trust Him or to cave in to their fears.

III. Preventing Pitfalls (17-23)

A. The Enemies of God's Kingdom Never Rest

Sanballat and company slinked away this time, but attentiveness would always be required. Nehemiah organized half of his own retinue of soldiers into an armed security force who also held the weapons for the other half who worked on the wall. Perhaps, every so many hours, they switched places. The officers stood by, ready to lead if a battle broke out. Materials were transported in such a way that while one hand might be holding the end of a board, the other was grasping a javelin. All the workers had swords strapped to their sides.

A single trumpeter accompanied Nehemiah. The people were spread out on all sides of the city, but if the trumpet sounded, they would know to unite and ready themselves for battle. Of course, their real strength lay in the encouragement worded in verse 20: "Our God will fight for us!"

B. Vigilance and Sacrifice Will Always Be Required

Those who lived outside the city now stayed in the city, not only to be closer to the work, but especially, so that they could be quickly rallied to fight. Nehemiah, his brothers and his closest guards were never without weapons. The translation of the last few verses is a bit fuzzy. It could mean that they never undressed or laid down their swords even to go for water, or it could mean that they only undressed to bathe. In any event, constant preparedness is what is being described.

The application to our age is clear. Satan never rests. He is always looking to undermine the purity and unity of God's people. And, where assemblies of believers are strong, he is constantly looking to pick off those who stray from the safety of the fold. We must abide not in paranoia or distress, but at least in a state of constant awareness that the unity and health of the church is something that must be guarded, for it is the nature of the old man of sin in each of us to fly apart.

An Observation about Holistic Small Groups

As we continue to try to recognize the seven qualities of healthy churches in the story of Nehemiah, notice how Nehemiah structured the community so as to combat discouragement, fear and negativism by replacing those emotions with courage and a hopeful anticipation of success. Holistic small groups can accomplish this. Communities need to be structured so that through relationships that are more than Bible studies and more than tea and coffee gatherings, people are prepared to meet the real obstacles to walking by faith through this world.

Recently, over thirty people participated in a survey to determine this church's relative strengths and weaknesses regarding those eight quality characteristics. We are waiting on what the experts have to say, but it was my sense that they were going to spank us in this particular area though it did not turn out to be our lowest area. If you are not involved in a Bible School class, a ministry team, the choir, the 4-C's, the men's breakfasts or in any other venue where building deeper relationships is possible, then why not? The worship assembly is crucial, but so are the smaller settings where more intimate relationships happen. Please give involvement in those areas thoughtful consideration this week.

No matter how difficult a week has been, I find great encouragement when I get to spend my study days in *Nehemiah*. There is a profound relationship between that ancient community and our own church community today that is real and not contrived. And, that connection tells me that God is for His people. He has great plans for His people. He desires to do a meaningful work among His people. But, He insists on doing it His way and by His Spirit.