

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Mission, Fueled by a Vision

(Studies in the Old Testament book of Nehemiah)

Roadblocks

(Nehemiah 4:1-23; 6:1-4)

Study #7

Introduction: Crashing through quitting points...

I am a camper. Over the years, I've told you some stories about adventures I've had on the trail. Some of them are even somewhat true.

But I'm also a reader and I've had more vicarious adventures through books than I have had on my own two feet.

I enjoyed Jon Krakauer's Eiger Dreams, a book that tells several stories of men and women who battled the elements and the odds to climb impossible mountains, because, well, because they are there.

Leonard Sweet's book, Summoned to Lead, takes its lessons on leadership from the life of Sir Ernest Shackleton, a British explorer who took the ship "The Endurance" to the Antarctic, where he and his crew survived unimaginable hardships.

Gates of Fire is Steven Pressfield's telling of the tale of the battle of Thermopylae, where King Leonidas and his "300" Spartan warriors held off the Persian army of Xerxes long enough to allow Greece to prepare for battle.

By reading these books, I've learned that I've never done anything hard.

But my favorite book along these lines is Undaunted Courage. This book, by Stephen Ambrose, traces the Lewis and Clark expedition that was commissioned by President Thomas Jefferson to explore the American West.

Captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark and crew made it across the continent and found a route to the Pacific. The stories of their travels up the Missouri River and over the Rocky Mountains are harrowing and awe-inspiring.

Inspired by heroes...

The reason we love stories like these is because they tell of heroes who have a single-eyed focus to push through obstacles to achieve their goal.

They allowed nothing to stop them. Not weather or injury or exhaustion or even threat of death.

Climb the mountain. Survive the Antarctic. Stop Xerxes. Find the Pacific.

We're inspired by people who crash through quitting points.¹

Well, for the next two Sundays, you and I are going to watch the Jerusalem Jews do just that. They face obstacles and press on to do what was on their hearts to do for God.

They're not yet at **Mission: Accomplished**. But they can see it. So, they navigate obstacles and keep on keeping on. It's inspiring.

And this is the story we need to see, today.

Remember. We're making our way through Nehemiah's story because they did what we want to do. They did what was on their hearts to do for God.

¹ I'm indebted to Bill Hybels who used this phrase in his book, Who You are When No One's Looking.

We are commissioned by Jesus to make disciples of all the nations. That mission might be carried out in any of a hundred different ways.

In whatever way God moves our hearts to act, we'll need to have the guts to crash through quitting points. Nehemiah and the Jews of Jerusalem point us forward.

These next two looks into Nehemiah are studies in resistance and conflict, problems and roadblocks.

Next Sunday, we'll see the work of God jeopardized due to internal conflicts, Jews vs. Jews.

This morning, though, Nehemiah and the wall builders face opposition to their project from external sources. Right off the bat we meet the leader of the opposition.

When Ridiculed (4:1-6)

A Message of Inadequacy (4:1-3)

The opposition of Sanballat (vv. 1-2)

[1] Now it came about that when Sanballat² heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became furious and very angry and mocked the Jews.

This Sanballat was the governor of the northern province of Samaria. And he was upset because he knew that if Jerusalem became strong - which she would if her walls were rebuilt - then his own realm would be weakened.

So, he spoke.

In what he has to say, Sanballat's not picking a fight. He's trying to take the fight out of the Jews. He wants to demoralize the builders.

² In Nehemiah 2:19 he is called a "Haronite" meaning that he hailed from a town near the Mediterranean coast called Horonaim, in the region north of Palestine.

By this time, the Jews have been throwing themselves into the work for a few weeks. They're working hard, night and day, building the best walls and gates they could.

Now they are getting laughed at. Sanballat is mocking them.

Do you remember the last time you were laughed at? It doesn't matter what you were mocked for. Do you remember how it stung?

That old line, "*Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me*" are true and not true. Words may not break bones, but they can sure break a spirit.

So, Sanballat fired away with five questions aimed at the hearts of the Jewish workers.

First, confirming their own worst fears about themselves, he asked, ***[2]... "What are these feeble³ Jews doing?"***

This is like that scene in the movie, **Rocky** (the original, the classic). On the night before the big fight with Apollo Creed, Rocky Balboa realized that he didn't have a chance to win the heavyweight title fight. He didn't have what it takes.

So here, Sanballat wanted to convince the Jews, "*You don't have what it takes to do what is in your heart to do for God.*"

Listen to the rest of the barbed questions Sanballat tosses out.

- He makes fun of their strength - "***Are they going to restore it for themselves?***"
- He tells them that God is not in the project anyway - "***Can they offer sacrifices?***"
- He makes fun of how long it is taking them - "***Can they finish in a day?***"
- He makes fun of the building materials - "***Can they revive the stones from the dusty rubble even the burned ones?***"

³ The Hebrew word used here for "*feeble*" was used to describe a small plant that was withering under the hot Palestinian sun.

These questions are all aimed right at the heart. And the heart attacks continue, as one of Sanballat's sidekicks, Tobiah, joins the fun.

The opposition of Tobiah (v. 3)

[3] Now Tobiah the Ammonite was near him and he said, "Even what they are building - if a fox should jump on it, he would break their stone wall down."

Tobiah and Sanballat are teammates, and their game is to *discourage* and *demoralize* and *deflate* the workers.

Most of us are familiar with these sorts of attacks.

You may have had a coach tell you to not even bother going out for the team. Or maybe you had a parent who wouldn't dream with you about your future.

There may be somebody in your life right now telling you that you can't, that people like you can't in a job or at school. That's a tough message to hear. It can demoralize.

It's tough when the discouraging word is about any topic. But what do you do when someone tells you that you don't have what it takes to do what you want to do for God?

What that heart attack hits, there is the temptation to throw in the towel and abandon your dream.

Watch what Nehemiah does.

Prayer Paves the Way Forward (4:4-6)

[4] "Hear, O our God, how we are despised! Return their reproach on their own heads and give them up for plunder in a land of captivity. [5] Do not forgive their iniquity and let not their sin be blotted out before You, for they have demoralized the builders."⁴

⁴ This prayer is appropriate for us today, when we direct it against our real enemy. These words from the New Testament describe the normal Christian life: ***"For***

He prayed.

We applaud that Nehemiah prayed. But his prayer may seem un-prayerlike. It may even seem mean. But before looking down on him for the prayer he prayed, think of what he could have done.

He could have swung a fist or pulled a sword. He could have done any of a number of things. But what he did was pray. He expressed his dependence on God

Prayer isn't the ONLY thing that needs to happen when there is an attack on our hearts. And it isn't usually the LAST thing we do in a crisis.

But, first, he prayed.

Applied personally...

The place where we serve Jesus is our place "on the wall." The context of your ministry - be it at home, at church, at work or school, in the community, or in the larger world - is your place "on the wall."

Throughout our time in Nehemiah I have urged us all to examine the wreckage all around us.

Well, you've looked. You've seen.

And, as every Jerusalem Jew who was willing to work had a place on their wall, so YOU have a place in Jesus' plan of redeeming the glorious human wrecks around you.

though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses." (2 Cor. 10:3-4) And again, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world-forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places." (Ephesians 6:10) We are at war, but we must remember who our real enemy is. We don't fight the (human) victims of our (spiritual) enemy.

When you start looking for your place “on the wall”, you may hear an inner, inaudible voice telling you, *“Don’t even bother. You’re not qualified.”*

If you actually find your place on the wall and start serving, you may hear audible voices giving you the same message. *“God doesn’t use people like you. You don’t have what it takes to do what is on your heart to do for God.”*

Your place on the wall may be anywhere.

It might center on building a home focused on Jesus or sharing Christ with a friend. It might involve serving with ESL or the Food Pantry or children or youth.

You could start a Bible study at work, go to Nepal or the Philippines for the summer, or serve with Habitat for Humanity or at a Crisis Pregnancy Center.

There are hundreds of places on the wall to serve and some of them are “fit” for you.

If discouragement comes and you’re tempted to despair, follow Nehemiah’s lead and pray.

And notice what happened when he prayed.

[6] So we built the wall and the whole wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind (literally, a HEART) to work.

The work resumed after prayer.

When the Jews became vitally involved in the work of God, they put themselves in the enemies’ crosshairs. The verbal bombs lobbed their way put them in need of prayer. They prayed, and that led to their experience of the power of God.

Is prayer necessary? You bet it is! But we’ll sense its necessity most deeply only if we are “on the wall.”

The enemy of our souls attacks us when we are obeying Jesus’ commands to be and to make disciples. The voices that seek to demoralize will come.

When those voices come, take a page from Nehemiah’s playbook: turn to God in prayer, and keep on keeping on.

But, the work isn’t over, and the opposition is still feisty. Watch as they launch a second attempt to halt the work.

When Bullied (4:7-23)

A Message that Threatens (4:7-12)

[7] Now when Sanballat⁵, Tobiah⁶, the Arabs⁷, the Ammonites⁸, and the Ashdodites⁹ heard that the repair of the walls of Jerusalem went on, and that the breaches began to be closed, they were very angry. [8] All of them conspired together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause a disturbance in it.

Here is a more pro-active attempt to stop the work. The enemies are threatening military action. Now it’s getting dangerous.

What will our friends in Jerusalem do in response? We’re not surprised by the first move.

A Dual Defense

First defense: prayer! (v. 9)

[9] But WE prayed to OUR God...

⁵ The Samaritan

⁶ The Ammonite.

⁷ The Arabs lived to the south and west of Palestine and were probably led by Gessem, someone we will get to know better later in the book.

⁸ Tobiah’s people and enemies of the Jews dating back to the time of Abraham and Lot - see Genesis 19.

⁹ The western-most enemies, living near the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, they were ancient enemies of Judah, dating back to the days of Saul and David, previously known as the Philistines.

But this is interesting. Up to this point it has been Nehemiah praying. This is the first time we read ***“WE prayed.”*** Everybody is getting into the act of depending on God.

So, they prayed. But that is not all they did.

Second defense: work/watch (vv. 9-23)

[9]...and because of them we set up a guard against them day and night.

Guards around the city (v. 9)

This twenty-four hour guard around the city wasn't action *instead of* prayer. It was action taken in concert with their trust in the Lord.

So, the guard was a great idea. But, the enemies' threats had wounded the Jews' psyche. It put the spirits of the builders in a tailspin.

Listen to the song they're singing.

Think like a soldier

WOUNDED PSYCHES (v. 10)

***[10] Thus in Judah it was said,
“The strength of the burden bearers is failing,
Yet there is much rubbish;
And we ourselves are unable
To rebuild the wall.”***

The song is about rubbish and exhaustion and inability. But the problem is not that the work has gotten harder. The problem is that attacks that go on and on have a cumulative draining effect.

The repeated mockings and now the threat of violence has simply worn the workers down.¹⁰

Earlier, the builders had been demoralized and then were strengthened by prayer. Now that they are re-demoralized, Nehemiah leads them back from the pits to the peak.

MILITARY MINDSET (VV. 13-14)

[13] then I stationed men in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, the exposed places, and I stationed the people in families with their swords, spears, and bows. (see also vv. 16-23)

He prepared them for battle, and the message was, *“No matter what the opposition, THIS WALL IS GETTING BUILT!”*

You and I know about the sufferings endured by Christians in different part of the world today. Some believers in Jesus are suffering greatly for their faithfulness to Jesus.

They fight for the privilege of continuing to serve Him, despite hardships. They're not picking up swords and spears to fight.

But they are putting on the whole armor of God (See Ephesians 6:10ff...!) - the SWORD of the Spirit, the SHIELD of faith, the BELT of truth, the BREASTPLATE of righteousness, the HELMET of salvation and the SHOES of the Gospel.

They are going to keep fighting to love God and to love people. That was the mindset of Nehemiah and the workers.

[14] When I saw their fear, I rose and spoke to the nobles, the officials, and the rest of the people: “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 houses.”

¹⁰ [11] *Our enemies said, “They will not know or see until we come among them, kill them, and put a stop to the work.”* [12] *When the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times, “They will come up against us from every place where you may turn...”*

That's as good as anything you'll hear in **Braveheart** or **The Lord of the Rings**.

And, sure enough, after the Jews set up their guard, the enemies retreated and work on the wall resumed.

Forward! Together! (15-18)

[15] When our enemies heard that it was known to us, and that God had frustrated their plan, then all of us returned to the wall, each one to his work.

I think it is significant that the opposition began where it did in the work on the Jerusalem walls. It began as **[6] *the whole wall was joined together to half its height.***

Thoughts about the half-way point...

Half-way is often where we encounter opposition. Half-way is where the temptation frequently comes to quit a great work.

Don't be surprised the challenge comes at the half-way point.

The beginning stages of a project are often energizing.

Whether it is following a new get-in-shape routine or a weight-loss effort or a stop-a-bad-habit-attempt or conforming to a new household budget, the first few days may yield dramatic results.

But inevitably, progress slows. The weight doesn't come off so fast. You wonder, *"Where are those 'wash-board abs', anyway?"*

Debt doesn't quickly disappear. And that habit you're trying to break gets more tempting.

That is when the thought, "QUIT" comes to mind. And "QUIT!" will come to mind when the theme is weight loss or serving Jesus.

Your enemy wants you to quit. He'll mess with your mind to get you to entertain the thought.

He'll remind you that not that many people are complimenting you for your service. He'll tempt you to resent people who are actually trying to help you improve as a servant-leader.

Or you'll allow yourself to be discouraged because your efforts at leading your family in spiritual matters isn't received with epic enthusiasm.

And then, when somebody actually opposes you for holding a Bible study at work, or for witnessing at school, or for giving time and money to serve someone in Jesus' Name, well, you start singing your own version of Nehemiah 4:10.

*"My strength is failing,
And there is so much rubbish;
I'm unable
To follow where Jesus leads."*

When any of that starts to happen, that's the time to pray. That's the time to call teammates together for support. That's the time to put on the armor of God.

Anything but quit!

There is one more form of opposition we will see today.

For this one, skip forward to chapter 6. The building project is almost finished. But, *"almost finished"* is miles away from *"finished."*

When Distracted (6:1-4)

Attempts to Sidetrack (vv. 1-2)

[1] 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.

The opposition has failed to stop the work through mockery and intimidation, bullying, and threats.

What will they try next?

Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem suggested that most insidious of all diversions from real work: a “meeting.”

The great philosopher (actually, humorist), Dave Barry writes, *“If you had to identify, in one word, the reason why the human race has not achieved, and never will achieve, its full potential, that word would be ‘meetings.’”*

Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem sent an engraved invitation to Nehemiah to meet them at Chephirim, a retreat center about twenty-five miles northwest of Jerusalem.

Nehemiah was quick with his RSVP.

Getting by With a Little Help from the Word “NO”! (vv. 3-4)

“I’m doing a GREAT work” (v. 3)

[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?”

He had traveled eight hundred miles to come from Persia to Palestine and had risked his life to restore Jerusalem to her former glory by building secure walls.

Why jeopardize all of that by taking time out for a meeting when the work is nearly done? It made no sense to stop the work to go to a meeting. So, he said, *“No!”*

“No!” is not a four-letter word and *“No!”* is a great word for people (and churches) to learn who want to stay focused on the wall.

We say, *“Way to go, Nehemiah! Don’t let yourself get sidetracked.”* But these enemies weren’t listening.

No! No! No! No! (v. 4)

[4] They sent messages to me four times in this manner, and I answered them in the same way.

Nehemiah was as resistant as they were persistent. Four times he gave them the exact same response to their four invitations!

“No!” “No!” “No!” “No!”

Was it sort of appealing to be invited to attend a high-level negotiating meeting with foreign dignitaries?

Not to Nehemiah. A meeting would have taken him away from the wall, and nothing was going to take him away from that wall.

Applied congregationally...

Most of us battle distractions. If we could win the battle over distractions, we’d accomplish many of the goals we set for ourselves.

Of course, the problem with distractions is that they are so distracting.

I like watching sports videos on YouTube. And you may be able to think of distracting distractions, too. Some are tech-related or leisure-related. Some may not be wholesome, and some may be dangerous. But some aren’t sinful, evil, or wicked.

The thing about many distractions is that they are the things that keep you from keeping the main thing the main thing.

Distractions will keep you from being the mom or the dad you want to be for your kids, the husband or the wife you want to be to your spouse, or the encourager you want to be to your friend.

Distractions will keep you from making progress in your career or in your pursuit of health and personal growth.

Most importantly, though, distractions will keep us from being and making disciples for Jesus.

If there is an attack suffered by the Jews of Nehemiah's day that is most like the attacks waged against us today, it's this.

What may be the enemy's most effective ploy in keeping us from doing what is on our hearts to do for God is the lure of distractions and our unwillingness to say, with Nehemiah, "**No!**"

Conclusion:

In your mind's eye, open a calendar and take a look at your next week, your next month, the rest of 2018.

Do you see yourself winning the fight to be the change agent for Jesus you want to be in your family? Do you see yourself becoming more effective at helping your friends take next steps with Jesus?

At the end of 2018, are you growing as a disciple? Are you hard at work wherever God has placed you "on the wall", serving the Great Commission?

What if you knew it could all be yours if you followed the model we've seen today?

Commit to turn to God in dependent prayer, with teammates;
Decide to stand firm and put on the armor of God;
Shout a courageous "**No!**" to distractions.

If a disciple - like you - will imitate the Jerusalem Jews, you'll find yourself becoming the Christ-follower you've always longed to be.

And if, together, disciples - like us, here at Northwest - do the same, we'll fulfill our mission, and God will produce out of our changed lives *impact* way out of proportion to our size, to His glory.