

Defeating Discouragement

Nehemiah 4

Rev. Brian Bill

October 27-28, 2018

Read Nehemiah 4

Are you familiar with *Murphy's Law*? The original "Murphy" was an engineer who conducted an experiment to test human acceleration tolerances. Unfortunately for him, he installed 16 motion sensors the wrong way, leading to the now famous quotation, "*If anything can go wrong, it will.*"

Here are some other laws blamed on poor Mr. Murphy:

- Left to themselves, things tend to go from bad to worse.*
- Matter will be damaged in direct proportion to its value.*
- Everything takes longer than you think.*
- You will never find a lost article until you replace it.*
- Everything goes wrong all at once.*
- If everything seems to be going well, you've obviously overlooked something.*

In chapter one we looked at how Nehemiah prayed and how he planned, in chapter two we saw how God moved him from the prosperity of Persia to the desolation of Jerusalem where he probed the walls and then presented a challenge to the people.

In chapter 3 we were introduced to the wall workers and discovered, *no one can do everything, but everyone can do something*. Here's an updated picture of some Edgewood peeps wearing their Grow Time shirts.

As we come to Nehemiah 4, everything seems to be going wrong all at once. Mr. Murphy shows up and reminds us when everything seems to be going well, we've obviously overlooked something. The workers are worried and wiped out, discouraged and defeated.

This incredible chapter will help us discover some *causes* and *cures* for defeating discouragement. Let's begin by looking at the *causes*.

External Causes of Discouragement

There are two main types of discouragement – some problems come at us from the outside, while others attack on the inside. Let's look first at the *external causes*.

The wall workers were initially excited. They began the work with great anticipation and joy. It says of them in verse 6, ***“the people had a mind to work.”*** They cheerfully and vigorously engaged in the work at hand. Things were going well, the people were excited, and the wall was going up. Then something happened.

Getting the work started on the wall was a major achievement, but keeping the workers working proved to be a much tougher assignment. Someone has said *exhilaration* is that feeling you get just after a great idea hits and right before you realize what's wrong with it.

Where God is at work, the enemy is also at work. Rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem was certainly no exception to this. When people take kingdom priorities seriously, Satan stirs up agitators to block the work of God. These enemies used two types of external forces.

1. Ridicule. The first attack is a whispering campaign, which in essence is psychological warfare. We see this in verse 1: ***“Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews...”*** To be ***“angry”*** means, he was ***“vexed”*** and ***“greatly enraged.”*** It has the idea of ***“burning mad.”*** To ***“jeer”*** means, ***“to mock, scorn and deride.”*** David experienced something similar in Psalm 35:16: ***“Like profane mockers at a feast, they gnash at me with their teeth.”***

This is the third time in the book we come across Sanballat, who was Nehemiah's nemesis. Every time we read about him he is standing against the work of God. Someone said ridicule is the *“language of the devil.”* Those who can stand bravely when shot at will collapse when they are laughed at. Goliath ridiculed David when he met the giant with only a sling in his hand (1 Samuel 17:41-47). The soldiers mocked Jesus during his trial and the crowd taunted Him while he was hanging on the cross (Luke 22:63-65, 23:35-37).

As Christ-followers, we can expect to be ridiculed and mocked as well, especially as we get closer to the return of Christ as we read in Jude 18: ***“In the last time there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly passions.”***

Sanballat and his cronies were ridiculing the workers even before the work started in 2:19: “...*they jeered at us and despised us.*” Here in chapter 4, he is making a speech in front of his friends and before the army of Samaria, which intensifies the power of ridicule.

Notice he called the workers “*feeble*” in verse 2, which means “*withered and miserable.*” It was used of dying plants. Then he ridiculed the task they were tackling by taunting them with four questions:

- “*Will they restore it for themselves?*” This must have made the Samaritan army bust out into laughter. How could a remnant of feeble Jews hope to build a wall strong enough to protect the city from a mighty army?
- “*Will they sacrifice?*” Sanballat is saying that it will take more than prayer and worship to rebuild the city.
- “*Will they finish up in a day?*” suggests the workers had no idea how difficult the task was and would soon stop what they were doing.
- “*Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, and burned ones at that?*” indicates that their building materials were so old and damaged that they couldn’t possibly be used to make a strong wall. When limestone is subject to intense heat, it becomes unsuitable for building.

In verse 3, it was Tobiah’s turn to ridicule the workers. He tried out a joke on them, “*Yes, what they are building—if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall!*” According to Lamentations 5:18, it was common for foxes to inhabit ruins. Foxes were small, like the size of a puppy. He was saying the wall was so low a fox could get up on it and its little bit of weight could cause it to come crashing down. I’m sure the enemies were guffawing uproariously at this point.

Archeological excavations reveal these walls were nine feet thick – it would take more than a small fox to knock them down. The workers became the punch line of every joke, and everyone got a laugh at their expense. Tobiah hoped his sarcasm would make the builders cast an apprehensive glance at their hard work and activate within them an avalanche of doubt and discouragement.

Let’s make the obvious point opposition is expected when we’re committed to kingdom work. While some people teach that having God’s “favor” means you won’t have problems or setbacks is simply not true. Nehemiah obviously had favor and yet needed to persevere through problems.

2. Repression. In verses 7-8, the enemies have moved from being bothered by the Jews to blowing up because they were **“very angry.”** As a result, **“they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it.”** Psalm 2:1 asks the question, **“Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?”** I love Psalm 2:4 because it shows what God thinks of those who plot against His people: **“He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision.”**

Warren Wiersbe writes, *“God’s people sometimes have difficulty working together, but the people of the world have no problem uniting in opposition to the work of the Lord.”* We see this in Matthew 27:1: **“When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death.”**

The references in verse 7 are to the four points of the compass. Sanballat and the Samaritans on the north, Ashdod on the west, Tobiah and the Ammonites on the east, and Geshem and the Arabs to the south. The workers were surrounded and lived in constant fear of being ambushed.

Internal Causes of Discouragement

Opposition from without can lead to animosity within. It wasn’t the voice of the enemy that was the most pervasive; it was the voice of God’s own people.

Notice the first part of verse 10: **“Meanwhile the people in Judah said...”** Discouragement was launched from within the royal tribe of Judah. They had David’s blood in their veins and one would think they would have more faith and courage than the rest of the people. They were looked upon as leaders and pacesetters. If the tribe of Judah was bummed out, then the other tribes would be more inclined to give up the project as well. Incidentally, we will learn in chapter 6 the tribe of Judah was compromised because they were working with Tobiah, their enemy.

1. Fatigue. Verse 10 reads, **“In Judah it was said, ‘The strength of those who bear the burdens is failing...’”** Simply put, the workers were wiped out. They were hitting it hard and needed some rest. The word **“failing”** has the idea of *“staggering, tottering, and stumbling.”*

When you are physically drained, it is very easy to become discouraged at the slightest problem. It’s also interesting to notice when the workers became fatigued

and discouraged. Verse 6 says the wall was built to **“half its height.”** Many times when we start a new project the first half goes quickly because we’re excited about accomplishing the goal. The halfway point is always difficult – you’re not far enough along to say, *“I’m nearly done”* but you’re too far to turn around and go back.

When the newness wears off and the work becomes routine and boring, it’s easy to become fatigued. When you’re tired it’s easy to become discouraged and think you will never finish the job. Verse 10 says: **“...by ourselves we will not be able to rebuild the wall.”** They were ready to throw in the towel. These are the same people who were described in verse 6 as having **“a mind to work.”**

2. Frustration. Verse 10 continues by saying there is **“too much rubble”** for them to continue rebuilding. They became discouraged as they encountered old broken rocks, dirt and dried-out mortar, and other debris. The rubble was everywhere. And it was frustrating.

Just as they lost sight of their goal, so too we can lose sight of our goal when we have too much garbage in our lives. Hebrews 12:1 challenges us to get rid of anything that will cause us to stumble: **“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.”**

I don’t know what your rubble is but it may be the internet, it might be a possession you’re holding on to, or even an unhealthy relationship. Is there a sin you’ve been playing around with too long? Do you have a drinking or drug problem, or are you involved in some other kind of entanglement that is tripping you up? Tim Challies writes, *“As a Christian you do not get to have a pet sin, a peccadillo, a sin you refuse to confront through the power of the Holy Spirit. Every sin, no matter how small or precious it seems, is to be confronted and destroyed.”*

3. Fear. The enemies of the Lord’s work had struck fear in the hearts of God’s people and they felt like giving up. In verse 11 they mention the fear of terrorism: **“They will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work.”** Our country has been rocked this week with the news that 13 suspicious packages containing bomb-like materials were delivered to a number of people. I’m glad an arrest was made for this despicable behavior. This put all of us on edge, didn’t it?

Notice in verse 12 who gets afraid the quickest: ***“At that time the Jews who lived near them came from all directions and said to us ten times, ‘You must return to us.’”*** Those most affected by fear are those who live near pessimistic people. If you want to limit the depressing thoughts that bring fear into your life, it’s best not to hang around with negative people. It’s like the old saying, *“If you’re going to soar with eagles, you can’t run around with turkeys.”* Proverbs 13:20: ***“Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm.”***

The Cures for Discouragement

Ridicule and repression can lead to fatigue, frustration, and fear. Let’s look now at four *cures for discouragement*.

1. Request God’s help. When faced with opposition, it’s tempting to get angry and hit back or defend ourselves. Listen to what Nehemiah did immediately after the enemies launched their verbal assault in verses 4-5: ***“Hear, O our God, for we are despised. Turn back their taunt on their own heads and give them up to be plundered in a land where they are captives. Do not cover their guilt, and let not their sin be blotted out from your sight, for they have provoked you to anger in the presence of the builders.”*** This was quite a prayer – he wasn’t praying for his enemies to become believers but instead for God to judge them. He knew the enemies were really fighting against God and asked God to deal with them.

He didn’t give a TED talk to the workers or organize raiding parties against the enemies. Here’s the principle we can learn from Nehemiah: *When people talk against you, don’t talk back – talk to God.* We see in verse 9 they prayed again: ***“And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night.”*** When their enemies started talking, Nehemiah continued to pray, and the people continued to work.

They actually get it right at the end of verse 10. After saying there’s too much rubble and they are too tired, they make a statement that is totally true: ***“By ourselves we will not be able to rebuild the wall.”*** Here’s something I posted this week: *“‘Just believe in yourself. You can do it.’ Said Jesus to no one. Ever.”* I’m reminded of Zechariah 4:6: ***“Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts.”***

2. Reorganize your priorities. In verse 6, we learn what they did right after praying: ***“So we built the wall. And all the wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work.”*** This is one of the clearest statements

of God's sovereignty and our responsibility in the Bible. It's like praying for safety when you go on a trip and then buckling your seatbelt! Or asking God for a job and then filling out a bunch of applications. John Bunyan observed, "*You can do more than pray after you have prayed, but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed.*" They prayed *and* they persisted. They worshipped *and* then they worked.

They made some additional adjustments in verse 13, "***So in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, in open places, I stationed the people by their clans, with their swords, their spears, and their bows.***" Nehemiah had already organized the people in chapter 3 and they had finished half of their task. Now, however, a new situation had come about that required a change in organization. If the enemies were going to attack they would most likely do so at the weakest places. So Nehemiah put guards at all the vulnerable spots.

This served two purposes – it discouraged the enemy and it encouraged the people because it dealt with their fear. It reminds me of the phrase attributed to Oliver Cromwell when addressing his army before invading Ireland: "*Put your trust in God, my boys, and keep your powder dry.*"

When we're discouraged, one of the best things we can do is to reorganize our priorities.

3. Remember the Lord. After sensing the discouragement within his team, Nehemiah rallied his troops in verse 14: "***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.***" Nehemiah knew the success of the wall was wholly dependent upon God who inspired its beginning. Verse 10 was actually true – "***By ourselves we will not be able to rebuild the wall.***" They needed to remember God and what He had promised. Let's linger for a bit on verse 14. We're to *fear not, focus on the Lord, and fight for our families.*

- **Fear Not.** I don't want to spoil the ending, but the enemies never do attack Jerusalem! In the book, *Scared to Life*, Douglas Rumford cites a study that shows why we shouldn't let fear rule our lives (*Marriage Partnership, Vol. 12, no. 2*):

- ✓ 60% of our fears are totally unfounded
- ✓ 20% are already behind us
- ✓ 10% are so petty they don't make any difference

- ✓ 5% are real, but we can't do anything about them
- ✓ 5% are real, and we *can* do something about them

In 1948, Richard Wurmbrand, a minister from Romania “*discovered there are 366 verses in the Bible that instruct us not to fear, one for each day of the year and one for leap year.*” When he was kidnapped by the communists, they put a sack over his head and shoved him in a car and sped away. Richard asked them what the date was. When they told him, he was able to call to mind Psalm 56:3: “***When I am afraid, I put my trust in you.***” To learn more about Wurmbrand’s imprisonment, I recommend the book and new film called, *Tortured for Christ*.

- **Focus on the Lord.** To “***remember***” means, “*to call to mind, to recall, to acknowledge.*” God is “***great and awesome.***” He is huge and holy. The word “***awesome***” is defined by one Bible dictionary this way: “*mingled dread, veneration, and wonder.*” Job 37:22 says, “***God is clothed with awesome majesty.***” One of the best ways to deal with fear of people is to remember how awesome God is as we see in Deuteronomy 7:21: “***You shall not be in dread of them, for the LORD your God is in your midst, a great and awesome God.***”
- **Fight for your families.** The beginning of the verse tells us what *not* to do – don’t be afraid; and it ends with what we are to do – fight for God’s priorities. Some of you are having relational struggles. Instead of fighting against each other, can I encourage you to fight *for* your marriage and your family?

Here’s my summary of this verse: *Don’t fear; the Lord is near; pick up your spear!*

This Wednesday marks the 501st Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. At its core, the Reformation was all about remembering who God is and fighting for the truth of the gospel.

<i>Sola Scriptura</i>	In Scripture Alone
<i>Sola Gratia</i>	By Grace Alone
<i>Sola Fide</i>	Through Faith Alone
<i>Solus Christus</i>	Because of Christ Alone
<i>Soli Deo Gloria</i>	For the Glory of God Alone

I've actually been repeating this phrase all week – ***“Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome.”*** You might want to do the same.

4. Recommit to the task. We see in verse 15 after God frustrated the plans of their enemies, they ***“all returned to the wall, each to his work.”*** In verse 16 the workers recommitted themselves by dividing up responsibilities: ***“From that day on, half of my servants worked on construction, and half held the spears, shields, bows, and coats of mail. And the leaders stood behind the whole house of Judah...”*** Nehemiah instituted security measures and made sure the leaders were supporting the people.

In verses 17-18 we read about those who worked: ***“...each labored on the work with one hand and held his weapon with the other. And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built.”*** With one hand they pushed the wheelbarrow, and with the other they carried a weapon.

In addition, Nehemiah recognized the importance of an alarm system because the work was spread out and people were vulnerable to attacks. He put the man who sounded the trumpet right next to him. Look at verse 20: ***“In the place where you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us.”*** The trumpet was the *shofar*, which was used to signal significant celebrations. It was sounded at Sinai, when proclaiming a new king, and to warn of war.

When Christ returns the shofar will sound again according to 1 Thessalonians 4:16: ***“For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God.”***

Also Nehemiah urged the people not to leave Jerusalem to go home at night in order to avoid ambushes. He and the other leaders never changed into pajamas and kept their weapons nearby. In a similar way, we must be on the alert as 1 Peter 5:8 tells us: ***“Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.”*** By the way, the devil is not concerned with half-hearted Christians but if you're sold out to the Savior, the adversary will look for ways to attack you.

Let's go back to verse 10 where we read the people complained about all the rubble. Here's something to ponder: *wasn't the rubble there in the beginning?* Of course it was. The difference was when they started the project they were focused on God and His character. But half-way through, they had become rubble-gazers.

Brothers and sisters, if you focus on all the dirt and debris and dust in your life, and in the lives of others, you *will* become discouraged.

Let's determine to be God-gazers instead of rubble-gazers.

This fall we've been learning about the importance of growing in our faith, growing as a family and growing our future.

One of the best ways to grow is to think in terms of next steps. I'd like to suggest some steps.

1. Grow in your faith

- Identify growth barriers and make changes
- Use the Bible reading plan for November. The theme is, "*God's help in overcoming difficult circumstances*" from Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther.
- If you're saved, follow the Lord in baptism
- Increase your consistency in gathering with God's people for worship

2. Grow as a church family

- Attend the Next Steps group beginning November 4
- Participate in our Prayer and Praise service on Sunday, November 4 at 4 pm. Our kids choir will be helping to lead us in praise and worship.
- Plug into a Growth Group

3. Grow our future

- Take your next step in giving (show Giving Ladder)
- Pray about your financial commitment to Grow Time
- Use the Commitment Card as a guide – we'll present these to the Lord in two weeks!

Let me remind you of some key dates coming up...

November 4 – Prayer and Praise Service at 4 pm

November 10-11 – Commitment Weekend

December 1-2 – Celebration Weekend. This is when we'll give our first gifts as part of our two-year commitments and any special one-time gifts.

Let's watch this brief video to see how one Edgewood couple has learned the joy of generosity.

Dale and Patty Steele Video Testimony

It's our turn now to sacrifice for the next generation.

Our Security Net

At the time it was completed in 1937, the Golden Gate Bridge was the longest suspension bridge in the world. During the first phase of the project many men fell to their deaths in the icy water. Murphy's laws were in evidence! Things were going from bad to worse because there were very few safety devices.

At the halfway point they realized they needed to reorganize. They installed the largest net ever made, attaching it under the area where the workers were working. Was it worth the cost and the time it took to do this? Ask the ten men who fell into it without being injured! Not only did it save their lives, the work was completed in three-fourths the time. Why? Because the workers no longer lived in fear of falling.

Brothers and sisters, God's great net of security spans the globe. No matter where we live. No matter what we've done. No matter how discouraged we've been. He's stretched out His everlasting arms beneath us. As a result, born again believers can live freely and without fear, knowing we are protected, safe and secure.

If you've not yet been saved from your sins, would you repent right now and turn to Jesus Christ? He stretched out His arms on a rugged cross and died in your place as full satisfaction for all your sins and then He rose from the dead on the third day. This will be applied to your life when you believe and receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

Discouragement can be defeated as we *request His help, reorganize our priorities, remember who He is, and recommit to the task.*

New Members - Darryl and Becky Pearsall

Benediction – Nehemiah 4:14: “*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.*”