

Don't Back Down – Build Up

by Ray C. Stedman

Most of us have had experience with what is called “Murphy’s Law,” the idea that if anything can go wrong, it will. There are many applications of it. For instance, if you try to fix something, Murphy’s Law says it will take longer than you anticipated; it will cost more than you expected; it will break down before it is paid for; and someone will not like it when it is done!

We have come to such a circumstance in Chapter 4 of the book of Nehemiah. Here, Nehemiah faces severe and violent opposition to his work of rebuilding the walls and gates of Jerusalem. We have seen that this rebuilding and reconstruction pictures for us the steps to recovery from areas of damage or ruin in our own lives. As we have been following Nehemiah in this great project we first saw his heartfelt concern and anguish over the damaged walls and ruined gates of the capital city of his country. It echoes the concern and the anguish that many of us may feel about areas that have been damaged in our lives by sinful habits, wrong attitudes, or feelings of bitterness or resentment. Then we have seen Nehemiah’s quick response to the opportunity to rebuild when it was given to him. This reflects our need to respond to opportunities that may be given to us to recover. We have observed Nehemiah’s honest facing of the magnitude of his task when he got to Jerusalem. He made a careful survey of the walls and the gates to see how much he had to repair. We then noted his first meeting with the enemies who would later oppose him, and, finally, we observed his care in organizing and sharing the labor of this great project as it got under way.

Now, in Chapter 4, Murphy’s Law comes into operation. The opposition takes off its gloves, and the real battle begins. We, like Nehemiah, have an enemy who opposes us with craftiness and power.

We have been singing about him in Martin Luther’s great hymn, *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*:

For still our ancient foe
Doth seek to work us woe.

Against every effort on our part to get our lives together and recover from damage, hurt, and ruin, we will experience opposition from the enemy.

Almost invariably his first attempt **to halt such recovery is to discourage us through ridicule, derision or rejection.** So Nehemiah discovers, here in the opening verses of Chapter 4.

When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews, and 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?”

Tobiah 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.” {Neh 4:1-3 NIV}

Hear the scorn, derision and sarcasm in those comments! Many of us, perhaps, have experienced this kind of attack. I know personally of people who are unwilling to do what is right because they fear their friends will laugh at them or mock them. I know a man who is unable to stop drinking because his drinking friends make fun of him. Yet drink is destroying his life. I know of others who are hooked on drugs, but they do not want to stop because they are afraid they will be laughed at.

Thousands of young people are trapped in habits that are destroying them out of fear they will be ridiculed if they try to stop. These are the powerful weapons the enemy employs here.

Incidentally when you remember who these enemies of Israel are, you may get a strong sense of déjà vu. Sanballat is the Governor of Samaria, and that is the area of Palestine which we today call the West Bank. Tobiah is the representative of the country of Ammon, which today is known as Jordan. In Verse 7 we learn that this coalition includes Arabs and the “men of Ashdod.” Today, Ashdod is part of the Gaza Strip. It is most interesting that history has repeated itself in our day. If you turn on your television news tonight, you will see these enemies from these same geographic areas still arrayed against the forces of Israel. I am not making a comment at this point as to the justice of one cause or the other; I am simply pointing out that it is amazing how up-to-date this account is, and how history does repeat itself – as we frequently see in these stories from the Bible.

Most of us have had some experience with this first weapon of ridicule and mockery which the enemy employs here. Perhaps you have had someone say to you when you are trying to stop something that was wrong, “Who do you think you are anyhow? Do you think you are better than us?” Or perhaps someone says, “You’ve made a good start but you won’t hold out. You won’t last.”

Watching the Inauguration of the President this week I was interested to hear how many of the commentators and reporters who greeted President Reagan’s term in office with hoots of derision and scorn were forced at last to acknowledge that he had done some great things for this country.

Nehemiah seems to be that kind of a man. He persists against the mockery and scorn of his enemies. Notice particularly what his response was to this attack. As you might expect from this man, it is one of prayer:

Hear 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. Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders [or, as the margin says, “they have provoked You to anger before the builders”]. {Neh 4:4-5 NIV}

Nehemiah regards this attack as an insult against God himself. Note that he does not argue back, nor does he retaliate. He does not blister these men with angry rebuttal. He simply responds by praying. It reminds us of Peter’s words about Jesus: “When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate. When he suffered, he made no threats,” {1 Pet 2:23 NIV}. This is a helpful picture of how to handle that kind of attack.

“Well,” you say, “this is a very strange prayer. Nehemiah is asking that these people be destroyed. What happened to forgiveness and love?” This sounds like a prayer the 49ERS would pray for the Bengals! {1989 Superbowl opponents} I have a short list of people whom I feel like praying for this way at times. However we need to understand something very important about this prayer. It is true that Jesus taught us to bless those who persecute us, to pray for our enemies and those who despitefully use us, and to do good to them. So how do we square Nehemiah’s prayer with what our Lord taught? The answer, of course, is to remember who it is that is praying. This is not Nehemiah, the ordinary citizen, the individual, who has been injured by someone’s personal attack. This is the Governor of Judea, praying about maintaining order and peace in his land and forwarding the work that God himself had sent him to do. This is a different kind of prayer because it is a prayer of an authority seeking to handle the problem of evil.

Many of us felt deeply the hurt of the people of Stockton last week when a madman opened fire on helpless children in a school playground, killing a number of them. The killer took his own life, but if he had escaped, what would you think of the authorities if they treated him with forgiveness? The first task of government is not mercy, but justice! Mercy is appropriate when it is an individual matter, but justice must prevail in government. There would be an outcry over the whole nation if the authorities treated a man like that with grace and forgiveness instead of bringing him to justice and seeing that this crime was paid for.

So, having prayed, Nehemiah returns to the work, as Verse 6 records.

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

Ridicule and sarcasm did not destroy their confidence. They unhesitatingly went ahead with the work. But the enemies of God are not through. They grow even angrier, and resolve upon the use of force. 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. They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it.

The enemy mobilizes its forces, escalating the attack, and begins to plan direct violence. When you begin to move with God to change things in your life for the better you will find that you are met first with derision and if you keep persisting, someone is going to get very upset with you and attack you in a vicious, perhaps physical way.

But see how Nehemiah reacts. He still relies on prayer.

But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.
{Neh 4:9 NIV}

He does more than pray, however. He posts a guard as well. Prayer and preparedness! This blending of the resources of the spiritual life with those of the material world is a marvelous picture of how believers ought to face threats, recognizing that we need action on both levels.

Still the enemy persists and now he launches a propaganda campaign:

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 NIV}

This is understandable. There was an enormous amount of debris and broken stones which had to be cleared away before they could get to the walls. It must have been very discouraging. I imagine it was like trying to move out of a house where you have lived for 33 years. My wife and I are actually doing that right now, and the mound of rubble that is left is very discouraging. Sometimes we think it will never end! These people were at that point of exhaustion and frustration.

The enemy immediately takes advantage of that weakness and discouragement:

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."

Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over [that is a sign they are very agitated by this], **"Wherever you turn, they will attack us."**
{Neh 4:11-12 NIV}

Have you have faced something like that? Were you ever threatened at work when you tried to correct an immoral or illegal practice that was being carried on around you? Perhaps someone said to you, "Keep that up and you may lose your job here." You may have been threatened with demotion, or with eviction from your apartment. You may even have been invited out in the parking lot to face a physical attack. These kind of things are quite possible when, like Nehemiah, we begin to right wrongs.

Nehemiah's response is very deliberate, enlightening, and helpful:

1. First, he carefully looks over the situation.

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. After I looked things over, ... {Neh 4:13-14a NIV}

He carefully assesses the situation and evaluates what is needed. This approach is necessary if we are going to improve our own lives.

- We must observe exactly where we are under attack:
 - What are we addicted to?
 - ◆ A wrong habit, a drug, an attitude of mind, perhaps?
 - ◆ Bitterness of spirit, possibly?
- When we have identified the source of attack, we must post a guard at that point.

This is what Nehemiah does. He assesses the situation and prepares for a full assault.

Following the attack on Pearl Harbor in World War II there was a popular song that said, "Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition!" That is what is going on here.

2. Then, second, Nehemiah reviews the spiritual resources available to them.

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.”

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 4:14-15 NIV}

Because they were believers they had a power at work in their lives that their enemies knew nothing about. They had invisible resources they could count on in times of danger. The great and awesome God who was with them would stand with them in their peril. When they remembered this, they became reassured and renewed in courage. The enemy saw that they could achieve nothing with their attacks. God had frustrated their plottings by Nehemiah’s simple reminder that God was with his people and would fight for them.

One of my favorite passages of the New Testament is found in Paul’s second letter to Timothy. Paul is a prisoner in Rome, and Timothy, a rather timid young man, is all alone and feeling discouraged in the great pagan city of Ephesus. The great apostle writes to him this word of advice: “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead!” {cf, 2 Tim 2:8}. Timothy was not alone. God was with him. Jesus is risen! He is awesome. He is strong. He is powerful. Reckon upon him and you will be able to stand against the most subtle temptation and the most dangerous threats that come against you.

3. Nehemiah goes on in the next passage to maintain his readiness.

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 who were building the wall. Those who

carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other, 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 4:16-18 NIV}

He now combines the work with the war. Each man goes to work with an instrument in one hand for labor and a sword in the other for battle. Thus, he is ready for either. Charles Spurgeon, the great English preacher of the last century, published a newspaper in his church, called: *The Sword and the Trowel*. The name was clearly derived from Nehemiah. Spurgeon said that Christians should always be building the kingdom of God, but be ready for battle at any time.

4. Verses 19-20 further illustrate this wonderful blending of faith and preparation.

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. Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!” {Neh 4:19-20 NIV}

5. Verse 21 through the end of the chapter shows the degree of self-sacrifice involved:

So we continued the work with half the men holding spears, from the first light of dawn till the stars came out. 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.” Neither I, nor my brothers nor my men nor the guards with me took off our clothes; each had his weapon, even when he went for water. {Neh 4:21-23 NIV}

There is an alertness, a vigilance here, that does not even allow for comfort.

To put this in New Testament terms, they are ready to endure hardship for the sake of the Lord. It must have been very uncomfortable, sleeping in their clothes on the hard ground be-

side the walls, but they were ready for anything the cause demanded.

In Chapter 5, **the Unseen Enemy tries yet another approach.** Nehemiah has successfully handled the threatened attack from without, but now he runs into a problem from within his own ranks.

Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their Jewish brothers. {Neh 5:1 NIV}

Here is internal strife, no longer attack from without but trouble from within. You may experience that too, in your struggle to recover some area of your life. You may run into family problems, pressures and problems with those who work with you, perhaps even from other brothers and sisters in the Lord. In this case it was a clash between the workers and the officials, the laborers and the overseers who were working on this project. This, then, is a class struggle. It is typical of all class struggles.

There are many complaints about these officials:

Some were saying, “We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain.” {Neh 5:2 NIV}

While they were working on the walls day and night they had no time to plant crops and yet they had to eat. Verse 3 reveals what made it difficult:

Others were saying, “We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine.” {Neh 5:3 NIV}

Does this sound like some of you? You have had to mortgage your property to make a living or to remain in this area. Perhaps you have been forced to borrow money to keep your family or yourself alive. This was the complaint of some to Nehemiah. And,

Still others were saying, “We have had to borrow money to pay the king’s tax on our field and vineyards. [The IRS was at work in these days as well!] Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our countrymen and though our sons are as good as

theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery.” {Neh 5:4-5a NIV}

In those times if you could not pay your taxes or debts, you sold your children or your wife to be slaves (last of all yourself, of course) in order to pay what you owed. This had already happened to some.

“Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others.” {Neh 5:5b NIV}

To a great degree these were justified complaints. Nehemiah deals with them earnestly and forthrightly. He could not change the conditions, but now he reveals the real problem.

When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, “You are exacting usury from your own countrymen!” So I called together a large meeting to deal with them and said: “As far as possible, we have bought back our Jewish brothers who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your brothers, only for them to be sold back to us!” They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say. {Neh 5:6-8 NIV}

Usury, of course, is charging interest for money which has been loaned – a common practice in our day. The Jews were allowed to do this with other races, but one thing was prohibited. Moses had spoken directly to this issue. He said that when a Jew lent money to another Jew he was not to charge any interest. He was to loan the money, but as he was loaning it to a brother there was to be no interest. Verse 11 tells what the interest rate was. It was one hundredth part per month, which would be 1% or a total of 12% per year. This does not sound excessive to us, but it was enough to outrage Nehemiah. The loan sharks were at work in those days as well! I wonder what Nehemiah would have thought of the 20% or more that is sometimes charged today. He is upset by this usury and demands that they stop.

“What you are doing is not right. Shouldn’t you walk in the fear of our God

to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let the exacting of usury stop! Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the usury you are charging them – the hundredth part of the money, grain, new wine and oil.” {Neh 5:9b-11 NIV}

This was more than a demand to end the practice of usury. He was insisting on restitution as well. They must give back their unjust gains. And their reaction was surprising.

“We will give it back,” they said. “And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say.” {Neh 5:12a NIV}

They were stricken by conscience because they knew from the Scriptures that what they were doing was wrong.

This suggests that believers ought to be very careful about taking advantage of others, especially other Christians, and getting rich at their expense. Scripture condemns this practice as uncaring and heedless of the poor testimony it presents to others. What vivid illustrations we have had lately of what the world thinks of the lavish lifestyles of public Christians who take advantage of others' generosity.

Nehemiah is encouraged by their promise that they will not do this. But he does not stop with that:

Then I summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised. I also shook out the folds of my robe and said, “In this way may God shake out of his house and possessions every man who does not keep this promise. So may such a man be shaken out and emptied!” [That was an oriental way of emphasizing that this was a very serious matter that God would take action on.]

At this the whole assembly said, “Amen,” and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised. {Neh 5:12b-13b NIV}

You will recall that President Bush in his Inaugural Address spoke of the sacredness of promises.

He even mentioned that “oaths taken on marble steps,” were to be kept as well. That is the kind of oath that Nehemiah administers here.

The rest of the chapter details the final action of Nehemiah to overcome this internal strife. He has first uncovered the real cause. He shows that it is simple greed that is the problem. He confronts the overseers with it, rebuking them and showing them it is wrong. He gains their promise, always by God's help, to stop this practice. There is a place and time for forthright, blunt confrontation in our relationships with others. Sometimes we need to point out to people that what they are doing is wrong and help them to see what needs to be done. That is what Nehemiah does.

Then he does one final thing.

Moreover, from the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, until his thirty-second year – twelve years – neither I nor my brothers ate the food allotted to the governor. But the earlier governors – those preceding me – placed a heavy burden on the people and took forty shekels of silver from them in addition to food and wine. Their assistants also lorded it over the people. {Neh 5:14-15a NIV}

This is the familiar picture of officials who get rich by using their power over people. They enhance their own lavish lifestyles and treat others with disdain and scorn. Nehemiah says, “I did not do that.” But his motivation is noteworthy.

But out of reverence for God I did not act like that. Instead, I devoted myself to the work on this wall. All my men were assembled there for the work; we did not acquire any land. {Neh 5:15b-16 NIV}

He was not acting simply to win favor among the people or to gain reelection to the job. It was not even to correct previous extortion. It was because he loved God! Because he was grateful for what God had done for him he passed it on to others. Jesus said, “Freely you have received, freely give,” {Matt 10:8 NIV}. This sense of gratitude is the most powerful motivation Christians can experience.

Characteristically, Nehemiah closes this account with prayer.

Furthermore, a hundred and fifty Jews and officials ate at my table, as well as those who came to us from the surrounding nations. Each day one ox, six choice sheep and some poultry were prepared for me, and every ten days an abundant supply of wine of all kinds. {Neh 5:17-18a NIV}

All this was at his own expense. He had every right to this as the governor, but he did not take it. He paid for it himself, for he says:

In spite of all this, I never demanded the food allotted to the governor, because the demands were heavy on these people. {Neh 5:18b NIV}

What a remarkable picture of compassion and concern for those who had much less! Nehemiah was willing to sacrifice himself in order to help them, and even to allow them to eat at his table the food that he had to pay for himself.

So this great man of prayer closes with a very brief prayer.

Remember me with favor, O my God, for all I have done for these people. {Neh 5:19 NIV}

Does that sound self-serving and as though he is bargaining with God? Some read it that way, but that is to read it wrongly. What Nehemiah is doing is recognizing God's gracious promise that he will care for the needs of those who walk with him. He will help them, but not always economically or materially. It may be spiritual blessing that will enrich them more than material gain. In the midst of extreme poverty, this has often been the case.

But God will always bless, for in Chapter 6 of Hebrews the writer says, "God is not unjust. He will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them," {Heb 6:10 NIV}. You can count on that. What Nehemiah is really praying is, "Lord, I sought to do your will, now respond according to your gracious nature." He does not demand anything nor does he ask for anything specifically. He does not bargain with God. He is merely calling upon God to honor his promise. This is what we often do in prayer.

There are two major lessons that loom forth from these chapters:

1. First, when we face enmity, we should do so with careful preparation, perseverance, and above all, prayer.
2. But, when we face discord and internal strife, let us do so with justice, with honest confrontation, and by setting a good example ourselves.

As we do this, God will enable us to solve the problems that face us and move toward rebuilding the ruined areas of our lives.

Prayer:

Our Father, strengthen us to act like Nehemiah of old and stand against the pressures of our day. Help us to be men and women who visibly live according to what we profess. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

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