

Return

Dealing With Discouragement

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Nehemiah 4

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A Man approached a little league baseball game one afternoon. He asked a boy in the dugout what the score was.

The boy responded, "Eighteen to nothing—we're behind."

"Boy!" said the spectator, "I'll bet you're discouraged."

The little boy replied, "Why should I be discouraged? We haven't even gotten to bat yet."

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Life is full of all kinds of circumstances that might bring us discouragement. We shouldn't be surprised about that. But when discouragement comes, how should we handle it? How do we deal with discouragement?

That's what we're thinking about this morning as we open the Bible. So why don't you stick around and we'll find out what God's word says in just a moment.

INTRO

Well good morning and welcome to Yountville Community Church. My name is Dan Bidwell, Senior Pastor here. As always, we are so glad that you set aside these precious minutes to meet with God, and to meet with us.

Today marks a milestone for Yountville Community Church. This is the 73rd Sunday since we last met in person as a church for Sunday Services. But that is all set to change next Sunday when we finally get to open our historic Yountville Chapel and campus after its reconstruction.

So we would love to invite you to join us in person next Sunday 22nd August at 10am, right here in Yountville in the heart of the Napa Valley. We'll have a church service, followed by a catered lunch and the chance to explore our new facility, as well as time to catch up with old friends and to meet new friends.

We will also have our Kids Church program for Toddlers up to Grade 5. You can register for that on the Kids page of our website yountvillechurch.org/kids.

For those who won't be here in person, the service will be livestreamed at 10am, so you don't have to miss out.

But if possible, we would love to see you in person, socially distanced of course. If you plan to stay for lunch, please RSVP for catering purposes via the Connect Card at yountvillechurch.org, or make contact with the church office.

Make sure you're signed up to our weekly email Newsletter. This week I'll be sending you more details about where to park, what to expect, that kind of thing. Again fill out the Connect Card and let us know that you'd like to be on the mailing list.

The last thing I want to do is to thank you for your ongoing support of the church. My family has been producing these videos in our living room now for almost a year and a half. I'm so excited that next week we'll be coming to you live from our beautiful new chapel. But the reason we've done all of this – church online, the historic reconstruction, the huge landscaping project – it's all so that we have the opportunity to introduce our friends and neighbors to Jesus, and to the hope that he offers in this lifetime and the next.

So this week, please pray for our Homecoming Sunday. Please consider inviting those friends and neighbors who don't yet know Jesus. And please let's use this new season to recommit ourselves to **being the church**, to meeting weekly, to being involved in whatever capacity you are able, so that we can achieve our mission as a church – **to share the hope of Jesus in the Napa Valley and beyond**.

Will you pray for that with me now?

*Our heavenly Father, you have blessed us richly with the gospel, with the good news of salvation, with the freedom to meet, and with a church building to meet in. Please be with us now by your Holy Spirit, as we prepare to **return**, to regather and rebuild. May we achieve the mission you have set out for us, to make disciples of Jesus Christ wherever we go. Father, bless and prosper our church, so that Jesus is glorified. In his name we pray. Amen*

INTER

Well, we are in the middle of our little series which I'm calling "**Return**." It's all about learning lessons from the experience of God's Old Testament people when they returned to the promised land after a long period of exile.

This week we return to the book of Nehemiah chapter 4, where we see a contrast from the story we read last week in chapters 1-3.

The fast recap of what we read so far: the year is 500 BC. Nehemiah is one of the Jewish exiles, living outside the Promised Land because of God's judgment on his disobedient people. After 70 years of judgment and exile, God has mercy, and causes the Persian King to allow his people to return to Jerusalem. But they find Jerusalem destroyed. Nehemiah hears about this back in Persia, where he is a senior official to the King. Nehemiah prays, and asks the King if he can go

and rebuild the wall. And the King not only permits it, he gives Nehemiah letters to ensure his safe travel, wood to rebuild, and a company of soldiers to protect him.

He rallies everyone he can find to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, and it's this inspiring story of God's provision and what can be achieved when we work together.

But that's not the end of the story.

Like a lot of things in life, rebuilding wasn't as straightforward as just putting one brick on top of another. Nehemiah and the people faced a number of challenges along the way that made the progress slow, and painful, and frustrating. They faced serious discouragement.

And so as we return to church next week, as we set about rebuilding the ministry here in Yountville, there are lessons for us to learn from their experience. Lessons to help us when **we** are faced with discouragement.

Expect Opposition

And the first lesson is this: when we are building something for the Lord, we shouldn't be surprised when we face opposition. In fact, we should ***expect opposition***.

You see, back in chapter 2 when Nehemiah gave the rousing speech that gathered the wall builders, there were two other characters listening in.

¹⁰ When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites. (Nehemiah 2:10)

Sanballat was the governor of Samaria, the state just to the north of Jerusalem. He was probably an Assyrian by heritage, someone whose family had settled in Samaria after God's people had been taken into captivity 70 years earlier.

That was how Empires conquered vast territories. You take most of the inhabitants away from a land, and you resettle other conquered people groups there, along with enough leadership to keep them subdued. You disorient them and take away their religion and identity and the ability to communicate and to rise up against you. That was a common tactic in the Ancient Near East.

So Sanballat is one of those Assyrians left in charge of a large and politically prominent state. But if the Jews returned to Jerusalem, to their own home territory right next door, if they re-established the temple and worship and grew in stature, then Sanballat's power would be threatened.

He was greatly disturbed.

Similarly Tobiah the Ammonite. He was probably a governor over the Ammonite territories to the east of Jerusalem. His name suggests a Jewish background, but his anger shows that he has no sympathy for God's people.

Listen to how chapter 4 starts:

When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews,² 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?"

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

Sanballat and Tobiah made a public show of ridiculing those who were doing the rebuilding. Protected by their army, they mocked and made fun of God's people.

First they belittle the builders: *What are those feeble Jews doing?*

Then they belittle their building skills: *Will they restore their wall?... "What they are building—even a fox climbing up on it would break down their wall of stones!"*

And then they belittle the Jewish religion: *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?"*

Sanballat and Tobiah have a smug attitude towards the people of God. And towards God himself. A smug superiority that comes out as sarcasm, ridicule, and mockery of religion.

It actually reminds me of the serpent in the garden of Eden, as he questioned God's word – *Did God really say... Surely you will not die...*

We often hear those same words today when we choose to speak about the Christian faith. Or even just when we seek to live according to biblical principles. Did God really say that? Surely there are no eternal consequences... Christians are mocked, belittled, insulted, sometimes in the media, and sometimes by those closest to us. I think that's the hardest.

So how do we deal with the discouragement of ridicule and insults?

I think it can be very difficult. Some of us naturally have thicker skins, but even then, words can take a toll on us over time. Others of us are much more easily wounded, and we take those negative comments to heart.

When that happens, it's OK to be honest with God about how you're feeling. When we look at Nehemiah's response to the mockery, his prayer is honest and raw – in fact he calls on God to bring judgment on his tormentors:

⁴ Hear us, our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. ⁵ 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. (Nehemiah 4:4-5)

Nehemiah is angry, and rightly so. To insult God's people is to insult God himself. So to follow Nehemiah's lead, perhaps you'll find some comfort in allowing yourself to be completely honest with God about how you're feeling.

Commentator Raymond Brown says:

“When we are aggrieved, it is better to pray honestly and express our pain in the holy place than harbor resentment and disdain prayer. Moreover, if fierce anger needs to be released, it is far better expressed in prayer than in uncontrolled bitterness towards others.”

So a time of honest prayer might help you acknowledge the deep hurts you feel.

But once you've done that, we also need to consider how Jesus reacted when he faced governors, and soldiers, and the cruelest mockery. Jesus said – *love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you* (Matthew 5:44). That's just what he did. He prayed for those who nailed him to the cross – *Father, forgive them for they don't know what they are doing.* (Luke 23:34)

And it wasn't just the soldiers who were his enemies. Jesus died for **us** while we were still God's enemies, because of his love for each of us.¹

And so even as the world hurls insults at us, we need to remember that they need Jesus, just like we need Jesus. They need to know God's love. So let's love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. Let's share hope with them, not hate. Let's allow good to overcome evil.² That will be good for our own hearts, and I believe it will make a difference in the hearts of those who would do us harm.

So that's the first big idea. Expect opposition, and meet hate with love.

When Opposition Intensifies

¹ Romans 5:10; John 3:16

² Romans 12:21

Often where we live, the worst persecution we'll face for our faith is the kind of mockery and ridicule we saw in the first verses of our chapter. Ridicule is hard, but praise God if that's all that we face. Because opposition to God can be much more intense, which is our second big idea today.

Come back to Nehemiah 4 with me. In v6, we see that the rebuilding quickly progressed despite the insults of the local leadership.

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

Sanballat is furious.

⁷ But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the people of Ashdod heard that the repairs to Jerusalem's walls had gone ahead and that the gaps were being closed, they were very angry. ⁸ They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. (Nehemiah 4:6-8)

The intimidation escalates, with enemies on every side plotting war against the people of God – Sanballat and Samaria to the north, the Arabs to the south, Tobiah and the Ammonites to east, and Ashdod to the west. God's people are surrounded by the threat of violence.

This is a reality for Christians in many parts of the world today, whether it's government-sponsored religious persecution, or pressure within a community or family especially when someone converts to Christianity. The threat of violence or disinheritance is part of following Jesus for many. In Nehemiah we see Sanballat try to use legal means to stop the work on the wall, questioning Nehemiah's credentials and his authority, accusing him of rebelling against the king (Nehemiah 2:19; 6:6), sending intimidating letters (6:19), attempting to discredit his character (6:13).

Brothers and sisters, we shouldn't be surprised to face that kind of opposition as we rebuild this church.

Well, I love Nehemiah's response in the face of intensifying opposition. He prays, and he keeps moving ahead with the work.

⁹ But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat. (Nehemiah 4:9)

One of the great lessons we learn in the book of Nehemiah is the power of prayer. Nehemiah was a man who prayed frequently. Long prayers. Short prayers. Prayer punctuated everything Nehemiah did.

As we rebuild our church, as we rebuild our ministry, prayer must punctuate everything we do. Because prayer reminds us that we're not in this alone. Growing a church is something that God does through our efforts. Like the Apostle Paul said, one of us might plant the seed, and another might water it, but God makes it grow (to paraphrase 1 Corinthians 3:6).

So I invite you to pray for our church. Pray short prayers, or long prayers. Pray on your own, or make a regular coffee date with someone to pray for our church. Commit to praying for church in your Bible study group, or in your family prayer time. Come to our prayer meetings at church. If you're watching this on Sunday the 15th, come to church this afternoon at 2pm and join us in praying over the campus in preparation for our reopening. Or drop by at another time and stand out the front and lift up the Napa Valley, and the great need for people to know Jesus. Pray!

When I read that Nehemiah '*posted a guard day and night to meet the threat*' it made me think of prayer. A number of churches have 24 hour prayer rooms, where there is always somebody in prayer for the church, ***like a spiritual guard posted on the church campus***, interceding on behalf of the pastor, the community, the nation. Perhaps we should aspire to something similar.

Because every church is engaged in a spiritual battle. Satan would love nothing more than to undermine the church, to discredit us, to mock and deride us. And he gathers his forces against the church, often in more subtle ways than armies gathered outside the gates. But that doesn't mean our opponents are any less dangerous.

So that is our second big lesson. Let us be a praying church, as we face spiritual opposition.

Refocus on God

The final lesson that we learn comes from the most intense period of discouragement for the wall builders.

After all the taunts, after all the physical intimidation, the cracks started to show in those building the wall.

First, they became overcome by fatigue. Building a wall is hard enough, but to do it day after day under the threat of violence, that will wear anyone out.

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." (Nehemiah 4:10)

We've been getting the final landscaping done here at church this week, and so I appreciate that sentence, "there is so much rubble that we cannot..."

In every building project we have to deal with rubble. For the last 2 years, we've had a massive dumpster onsite for all the construction rubble. It was filled and emptied, filled and emptied dozens of times.

At least with physical rubble you can get it cleaned up and put away. But we all have other 'rubble' in our lives, rubble that can block our pathways, rubble that piles up when we're not looking, issues that we constantly deal with that never seem to be resolved.

The 'rubble' can wear us down. And it can leave us saying, "I can't... I don't have space for that right now in my life... I don't even know where to start."

Have you ever had that feeling? I have. It's discouragement.

Discouragement can get us so wrapped up inside our head, that we stop functioning. Discouragement can paralyze us. And that's exactly what the Enemy wants...

There's a story that one day the devil put out a 'Closing Down' sign. He placed all his tools out for sale, each with a price: pride, laziness, arrogance, hate, envy, jealousy.

But there was one tool, the most worn-out tool of them all, with a sign under it: "Not For Sale." It was a strange-looking tool, and so someone asked the devil, "What is that tool and why isn't it for sale?"

"Well," Satan whispered, "I can't afford to get rid of that one! That's my chief tool—discouragement. With this tool, I can pry open a heart, and once I'm there, I can do most anything I want. It is badly worn because I use it on almost everyone, since very few people know it belongs to me."

Discouragement is one of the deadliest weapons of the Enemy. Discouragement leads us to say, I cannot.

Nehemiah says, perhaps on your own you cannot, but together we can...

I love how this section ends. Nehemiah doesn't let their fear, or their fatigue lead to failure. Instead, he gathers people into their family groups, and he posts them on the wall together.

¹³ 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. (Nehemiah 4:13)

There is something about having someone to stand beside when things are going badly. Even better when it's someone you trust. Better still, a group of people who can support you. Nehemiah was clever to arrange the people into groups like that.

That's one of the reasons why we encourage everyone at church to join a small group. We're not meant to live out our faith alone. We need others to guide and support and encourage us. To pray for us. The best groups become like a new family, standing shoulder to shoulder in the work of the gospel, firm through the fiercest storm.

But none of that is enough without God.

And so Nehemiah takes the focus off their discouragement, and refocuses their attention on God.

¹⁴After 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 families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes."

Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome.

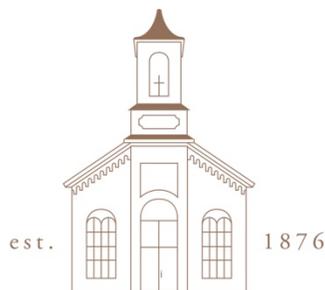
Our enemies might be lined up outside the gates, but God is so much higher, so much stronger, so much more in control than any earthly opposition. He is even sovereignly over and above spiritual opposition.

The gates of hell will not overcome the church, Jesus said (Matthew 16:18). Nothing can get in the way of God achieving his ultimate plan to bring everything in heaven and on earth under the lordship of Jesus (Ephesians 1:10). Neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:39).

Nehemiah reminds us to take the focus off our discouragement, and to refocus our attention on God.

Because when we do that, we know we can't lose. Like the Little League kid in my opening illustration, we might look like we're behind on the scoreboard, but we haven't even gone in to bat yet. God is on our side, and God's team will always win.

Why don't we thank him for that now?



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