



HG236: Nehemiah - Be Determined
Firm Faith In The Midst Of Opposition

Nehemiah 4:1-23

Home Group Study Notes

27 February 2022 - Revd Paul A. Carr



PLEASE COMPLETE AS MUCH AS YOU CAN
ON THIS WORKSHEET IN PREPARATION
BEFORE THE MEETING!

*Don't forget to take your Bible to Home Group
with you, along with any previous notes and other
resources which might be helpful for your discussions.*



Welcome (10 mins)
Ice Breaker

What is the most 'catastrophic' piece of DIY you've
ever carried out?



Looking Upwards (10 mins)
Worship

In your time of worship, you may want to sing Songs
of Praise; listen to a Worship CD, as well as using
Meditations; Bible Readings; Prayers ...



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Home Group Sermon Notes

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Introduction In ch3 we saw how the people began their work with great anticipation and joy. In 4:6: we read how the *“people worked with all their heart.”* Things were going well, the people were excited, and the wall was going up. Starting the rebuild was a major achievement but ‘keeping the workers working’ proved to be a much tougher assignment for Nehemiah. What would you say was biggest danger to our wellbeing today? It isn’t COVID, or cancer, or one of several other illnesses. This ‘plague’ however, can be just as deadly as the most dreaded disease known to man. It’s an ever-increasing pandemic and it’s called discouragement. We all suffer from it. No-one is exempt. At least three things make it such a potent problem:

It’s universal None of us are immune from discouragement. Every one of us has been discouraged at one time or another in our lives.

It’s recurring Being discouraged once does not give us an immunity to the disease. We can be discouraged over and over again. In fact, we can even be discouraged by the fact that we become discouraged!

It’s highly contagious Discouragement spreads by even casual contact. We can be affected by the discouragement of others.

Project managing the rebuilding of the walls starts to get complicated for Nehemiah as he encounters discouragement in the city. There are, I believe, two types of discouragement that we can see in this passage: one that comes from the outside; the other that attacks from the inside.

External Causes Of Discouragement Where God is at work, the enemy is also hard at work and the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem was no exception to this. When people take kingdom priorities seriously, Satan stirs up agitators to prevent God’s work. We’ve all experienced this at some time in our lives and here Nehemiah’s enemies used two approaches:

Ridicule Vs1-2: *“When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews ...”*. Every time we read about Sanballat, he is standing against the work of God, rejecting and ridiculing everything the people are trying to accomplish. But this is nothing new. Sanballat and his cronies had begun to ridicule the workers before the work even started in 2:19: *“...they mocked and ridiculed us.”* Here in ch4, he is making a speech before the army of Samaria, intensifying the power of ridicule. He called the workers “feeble” (meaning ‘withered and miserable’). The Jews, some of whom had been back from exile for more than two generations, actually started to believe they were the feeble people of God, that their enemies were too strong and the work was too great. As a consequence, they had not attempted to rebuild the walls for decades. The walls were broken because their hearts were broken.

Sanballat asked four taunting questions: 1) *“Will they restore their wall?”* That must have made the Samaritan army break 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? 2) *“Will they offer sacrifices?”* Sanballat is wondering whether they are going to get God involved. It will take more than prayer and worship to rebuild the city. 3) *“Will they finish in a day?”* suggests that the workers had no idea how difficult the task was and would soon stop what they were doing. 4) *“Can they bring these stones back to life?”* their building materials were so old and damaged that they couldn't possibly be used to make a strong wall.

In vs3, it was Tobiah's turn to ridicule the workers: *“What they are building -if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones!”* Archaeological excavations reveal that the walls were nine foot thick -and would need more than a fox to knock them down. The workers became the punch line of every joke, and everyone got a laugh at their expense. Again and again, the voices challenged, frustrated, and belittled the Jews. One thing I've noticed over the years is that whenever you attempt to get involved in the work of God, you will always face ridicule. My response has always been to expect it and not to let it deflect me from doing what I believe is God is calling me to do. HMP ridiculed daily. Made me strong!

Oppression Jerusalem was surrounded by opposing armies: Samaria to the north, Ashdod to the west, Ammon to the east, Arabia to the south. The workers lived in constant fear of being ambushed. Vs7-8: *“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.”*

Internal Causes of Discouragement It's often said about the church that: *pessimism has always been a greater problem than atheism.* No one ever said that following God would be plain sailing. The Bible is very realistic when it comes to highlighting the cost of following, and living to please, God. Though Nehemiah was doing God's work, it wasn't without its difficulties:

Fatigue Vs10: *“Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, ‘The strength of the labourers is giving out...’* When we are feeling physically drained, it's very easy to become discouraged isn't it? It's also interesting to notice that, when the workers became fatigued and discouraged, vs6, the wall was built to half its height. When we start a new project the first half goes quickly because we're excited about accomplishing the goal. But when the novelty wears off and the work becomes routine and boring, it's easy to become discouraged and think that you will never finish the job. Vs10 says: *“...we cannot rebuild the wall.”* They were ready to throw in the towel. These are the same people who were described in vs6 as those who worked with all their heart.

Frustration Vs10 continues by highlighting the fact that there is *“so much rubble”* they cannot rebuild the wall. But wasn't the rubble there in the beginning? Of course, it was. The difference when they started the project was that they were focused on God, now, they had become focused on the rubbish on the ground. If you focus on all the junk in your life, and in the lives of others, you will become discouraged. Let's determine to be God-gazers instead of rubble-gazers!

From Within: Discouragement first started within the tribe of Judah, vs10: *‘The strength of the labourers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall.’* They had David's blood in their veins, and you would think they would have had more faith and courage than the others. But no! Vs11: *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.* Vs12: *Wherever we turn, they will attack us.* The tribe of Judah were the leaders. If they were weary, then the other tribes would be more inclined to give up as well. It wasn't the voice of the enemy that was the most pervasive; it was the voice of God's own people. The voices of discouragement from within had destroyed the hearts of the people and it came from those who should have known better: the hierarchy, the elite, those with royal blood. Discouragement from within is one of the key weapons in the devil's armoury.

Fear The enemies of the Lord had struck fear in the hearts of God's people, and they felt like giving up. Did you notice who gets afraid the quickest? Vs12 *“Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over ‘Wherever you turn, they will attack us.’”*

Those most affected by fear were those who lived near pessimistic people. If you want to limit the depressing thoughts that bring fear into your life, then it's best not to hang around with negative people.

The Cures for Discouragement We know the causes of discouragement, ridicule and oppression, can lead to fatigue, frustration, and fear. However, I believe that discouragement is a curable disease - you don't have to live with this chronic condition anymore! Let's look briefly at three cures for discouragement.

The first cure is to request God's help The first thing Nehemiah did, when the ridicule began, was to pray. He didn't give lectures to the workers, organise raiding parties or create a propaganda campaign to put a different spin on their words. He didn't begin with a human response to the problem. He knew that the enemies were really fighting against God and so he asks God to deal with them. *Vs4-6: 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.* Prayer, essentially, is letting God know exactly how we feel. He knows everything before we pray, but it's so therapeutic to get things off our chest isn't it? I know that, sometimes, God is the only person to whom I dare say what I really want to say. Nehemiah was a man who was able to vent his fury, frustration and exasperation before God.

Only God could save them from their despair, embarrassment and disaster. Nehemiah needed to speak the words of God at the right moment, and that's what he did. Not only did Nehemiah turn to prayer, the Jews did too, vs9: *... we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.* Here's a good principle we can learn from Nehemiah: When people talk against you, don't talk back, talk to God.

The second cure is to reorganize your priorities Vs13, *"Therefore I stationed some of the people behind the lowest point of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families, with their swords, spears and bows."* Nehemiah had already organized the people in ch3 but now they needed to be reorganised. Nothing's ever 'set in stone' if you excuse the pun! If the enemy were going to attack, they would do so at the weakest places. So, Nehemiah put guards in all the vulnerable places. When we're discouraged, one of the things we can do is to reorganize our priorities. Don't be overcome by discouragement. Adopt a new attitude. Get some help. Do something about it! But start by praying.

The third cure is to remember who God is After looking everything over and sensing the discouragement of the people, Nehemiah rallied his troops in vs14: *'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'*. Nehemiah reminds everyone of the great and awesome God and how he had promised to meet the needs of his people, however serious their adversities, and would not go back on his word. Their circumstances had changed, the work was more difficult and the enemy more active, but the Lord was exactly the same. The presence of women and children was a constant reminder that they were not simply fighting for the city's walls but for their family and community's future.

I don't know about you, but it's easy for me to forget God when things are tough. I need to be constantly reminded that He is always there for me. I've often said that hindsight is one of the greatest gifts we have as Christians. It helps us to remember that God is great and awesome and more than able to deal with our discouragement. When you're feeling down, turn from your discouragement to the One who is able to do something about it. God has been faithful to you in the past. He is faithful to you today. And He will be in the future.

The highly visible 'emergency protection force' had alerted the enemy. The plot for the surprise attack had been foiled and Nehemiah believed it was safe for the builders to return to work and made sure that the entire work force was permanently and efficiently protected by dividing them

into builders and soldiers, vs16-18: From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armour. Even the labourers who carried rubble away from the city were supplied with armour and did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other. Each of the builders was quipped with his sword at his side as he worked.

It's a great picture isn't it? Probably one of the most vivid of the OT - tools in one hand, swords in the other. Nehemiah knew that he couldn't interrupt the work every time he heard a new rumour, so he set up a plan that solved the problem: half of the men worked on the wall while the other half stood guard. The man with the trumpet stayed close to Nehemiah so the alarm could be given immediately. The people were prepared to fight, vs14, but they realized that it was God who fought with them, and He alone could give the victory.

Conclusion Let's never forget that the community had to work together in order to succeed together. Some would stand guard while the others worked, and then they would reverse their roles. This meant there had to be cooperation, awareness, sensitivity, insight and understanding into what was going on in another person's life. We, as Christians, are meant to be people who can carry both a sword and a tool. But we also need to be part of a community, and there are times when we need to rest and someone else needs to stand guard for us. We need to have people who know us well enough that they can speak to us of the things in our lives where we need help, who can either challenge or strengthen us. Are we building the kind of relationships in which somebody will come to our aid if we blow a trumpet? If we fall, will there be people there to help us up again?

Nehemiah and the people are going to run into more threats in the next few chapters. But the enemy never mounts a charge or comes in force. That's because as those 'feeble believers' become stronger the enemies realise they are no match for them. These enemies threaten to go to the king; they threaten warfare, ambush, killing; they threaten everything. But they never do any of it. All they do is infiltrate and deceive. Most of what we fear and are overwhelmed by is a thousand times worse in our mind's eye than it is in reality.

Opposition, I believe, is not only evidence of God's blessing and the enemy doing all it can to undermine the work we do, it's an opportunity for us to grow. And so, let us both be able have a firm faith, and be willing to work together, in the midst of the opposition that does, and will, surround us. It's easier, sometimes to fight the opposition from without, and not so easy when it comes from within is it?

Let each of us do our best to ensure that it won't be us who will be the cause of discouragement to the mission and ministry of God's work here in Emmanuel. Many of our church activities have restarted. Onsite numbers are increasing. We've made some great progress in recent times, and it may still take a while. I'm not saying it's going to be easy. The voices of the enemy are very persuasive. They know our weaknesses too well. But the only way to defeat the enemy is to do so together. I truly believe, by God's Grace, that we can work together to build a bright future for Emmanuel in a post-pandemic world and, as a consequence, the community of Billericay.

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Emmanuel Church Text for 2022

*“But the plans of the Lord stand firm forever,
the purposes of His heart through all generations.”*

Psalm 33:11



Looking Upwards (40 mins)

Bible Study

Read the text for this study, and any references given, then answer the following questions. You may find it helpful to listen to the sermon and/or read through the sermon notes as you do so. Discuss some, or all, your answers with your Home Group and, remember, these questions are only a guide to start your discussions.

1. Do you agree with Paul's assertion that discouragement is: *Universal; Recurring; and Highly Contagious*? Have you ever experienced this in your Christian life? How does this make you feel? What can you do to avoid feeling this way?

2. The Jews almost stopped working on the walls because of the ridicule they faced and because they were reminded of the failures of the past. Have you ever been in the situation, both as a Christian and in your place of work and/or socially, where you have all but stopped trying because of these two factors?

3. Read 4:10-12. Have you ever felt discouraged as a consequence of the attitude of someone in Emmanuel or a church you've attended? How did you respond? What can we do to ensure we are not the discouragers and stumbling blocks in the mission and ministry of Emmanuel?

4. Nehemiah's response to the discouragement of the Jews was to pray and encourage them to pray with him, vs4-6;9. Does this come naturally to you? Is Nehemiah right to pray against people and circumstances? Do you have any examples from the Bible or your own lives?

5. Vs16-18 paints a vivid picture of getting the balance between working and fighting! Paul suggested: "*Christians are meant to be people who can carry both a sword and a tool.*" Is this a helpful image about the Christian life? What principle can you gain from Nehemiah's 'unusual' approach?

6. Are you building the kind of relationships in which somebody will come to your aid if you blow a trumpet, vs18? What might you need to do to put these in place?



Is there anything you most want to put into practice as a result of this study?



Looking Inwards (15 mins) *Caring For Each Other*

Reflecting on your life at the moment, is there anything you would like to share with other members of your home group which you feel is appropriate (this is an opportunity to share, not something you have to do, however, 'It's the sharing that enables the caring!') for:

Thanksgiving?

Prayer?

Encouragement?

Support in any way?



Looking Outwards (15 mins) *Concern For Others*

Is there anything concerning someone in your: family; circle of friends; neighbours or church, which you would like to share (please be sure not pass on anything that is confidential or which you think the person concerned would not wish to be shared) for:

Thanksgiving?

Prayer?

Encouragement?

Support in any way?

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