

Broken and Restored

An Exposition of Nehemiah

4 Now it came about that when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became furious and very angry and mocked the Jews. ² He spoke in the presence of his brothers and the wealthy *men* of Samaria and said, “What are these feeble Jews doing? Are they going to restore *it* for themselves? Can they offer sacrifices? Can they finish in a day? Can they revive the stones from the dusty rubble even the burned ones?” 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^a!”

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^b.

⁶ So we built the wall and the whole wall was joined together to half its *height*, for the people had a mind to work^c.

⁷ Now when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the Ashdodites 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.

^a 4:1-3 **Now it came about that when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became furious and very angry and mocked the Jews. He spoke in the presence of his brothers and the wealthy *men* of Samaria and said, “What are these feeble Jews doing? Are they going to restore *it* for themselves? Can they offer sacrifices? Can they finish in a day? Can they revive the stones from the dusty rubble even the burned ones?” 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!”** Laughter and humor are not always to be associated with cheerfulness. God’s people were doing what they were called and gifted to do. This made God’s enemies angry and that anger came out in the form of intense sarcasm. We become angry because of desire. When our desire to attain something or to protect what we already have becomes greater than our desire to love God and to love others, we fly into a rage like Sanballat.

Sanballat called the people “feeble.” The word was associated in the Hebrew Bible with dried up crops and barren women. His contention was that they were too downtrodden to accomplish any worthy project. He also questioned their ability to do the work without help from the outside. He even criticized their ability to worship. Then pointed out how big of a mess was theirs to clean up. Joining in with a less than witty contribution was Tobiah, who tried to make a joke about the weakness of the wall.

^b 4:4-5 **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. Do not forgive their iniquity and let not their sin be blotted out before You, for they have demoralized the builders.** So Nehemiah prayed. He asked God to take note of what was going on. He asked God to bring justice (and prayed very specifically). When times are hard the worst thing you can do is nothing. The people had responsibilities. They prayed and then they went back to work.

^c 4:6 **So we built the wall and the whole wall was joined together to half its *height*, for the people had a mind to work.** The totality of one’s life is the sum of lots of little moments. These little moments are opportunities for action rather than self-pity. The people completed half of their project in the middle of a hard time because they “had a mind to work.”

⁹ But we prayed to our God, and because of them we set up a guard against them day and night^a.

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^b.”

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,” 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. 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^c.”

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. ¹⁶ From that day on, half of my servants carried on the work while half of them held the spears, the shields, the bows and the

^a 4:7-9 **Now when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repair of the walls of Jerusalem went on, and that the breaches began to be closed, they were very angry. All of them conspired together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause a disturbance in it. But we prayed to our God, and because of them we set up a guard against them day and night.** When mockery does not work, try violence. The reason Nehemiah emphasized these particular enemies was to illustrate that the angry neighbors were located to the north, south, the east and the west. Jerusalem’s walls were threatened as they had been 140 years earlier. But this time the hearts of the people were wholly devoted to the Lord. They prayed.

There is nothing inconsistent about crying out to God for help against your enemies and posting a guard at the same time. Sometimes God parts the sea. Sometimes He sends us bridge builders. Watch *and* pray.

^b 4:10 **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.”** This is a song. The people felt despair and they were singing the blues. Like the Psalms, however, they sang their blues before the face of God.

^c 4:11-14 **Our enemies said, “They will not know or see until we come among them, kill them and put a stop to the work.” 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,” 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. 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.”** Bullies and terrorists always use the same tactics. Intimidation and fear create more discouragement than the best weapons. Nehemiah took off his governor’s hat and his engineer’s hat and took on the role of pastor. The big task of a spiritual leader is to communicate to the people how big their God is and then to show them how faith in Him should look in real time. In this situation Nehemiah said that the Lord is great and awesome. Because our God is great and awesome we often find ourselves needing to defend ourselves against His enemies.

breastplates; and the captains *were* behind the whole house of Judah. ¹⁷ Those who were rebuilding the wall and those who carried burdens took *their* load with one hand doing the work and the other holding a weapon. ¹⁸ As for the builders, each *wore* his sword girded at his side as he built, while the trumpeter *stood* near me. ¹⁹ I said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, “The work is great and extensive, and we are separated on the wall far from one another. ²⁰ At whatever place you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us^a.”

²¹ So we carried on the work with half of them holding spears from dawn until the stars appeared. ²² At that time I also said to the people, “Let each man with his servant spend the night within Jerusalem so that they may be a guard for us by night and a laborer by day.” ²³ So neither I, my brothers, my servants, nor the men of the guard who followed me, none of us removed our clothes, each *took* his weapon *even to* the water^{b, c}

^a 4:15-20 **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. From that day on, half of my servants carried on the work while half of them held the spears, the shields, the bows and the breastplates; and the captains were behind the whole house of Judah. Those who were rebuilding the wall and those who carried burdens took *their* load with one hand doing the work and the other holding a weapon. As for the builders, each *wore* his sword girded at his side as he built, while the trumpeter *stood* near me. I said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, “The work is great and extensive, and we are separated on the wall far from one another. At whatever place you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us.”** Now Nehemiah had to become a military strategist. Bullies like to prey on victims who will not fight back. The builders of the wall had to take extra shifts working as guards. Even those working on the walls were armed and prepared for a fight. A trumpeter became the means of rallying the troops if the need arose.

There was already evidence that God was fighting for His people. Back in verse fifteen Nehemiah records that the enemy knew God had frustrated their plan. This is reminiscent of the way King Jehoshaphat cried out to God about an imminent invasion and then put the Levitical choir out in front of the army (2 Chronicles 20:1-25).

^b 4:21-23 **So we carried on the work with half of them holding spears from dawn until the stars appeared. At that time I also said to the people, “Let each man with his servant spend the night within Jerusalem so that they may be a guard for us by night and a laborer by day.” So neither I, my brothers, my servants, nor the men of the guard who followed me, none of us removed our clothes, each *took* his weapon *even to* the water.** Vigilance is seldom comfortable. The work did not continue at night, but the guarding did. Nehemiah showed himself a servant-leader in that he shared the responsibility with the night watchmen.

^c 4:1-23 The great temptation in hard times falls in two extremes. The first is to spend all your energy describing your concerns. Looking at hard things honestly is good. Allowing them to consume your time and thoughts is not.

The second temptation is to fail to see your responsibilities. You give yourself permission to procrastinate or even let others down so you can have more time to be worried, afraid or feel sorry for yourself. You know when you are emotionally overextended because you start to let things go.

There is a better way. First you write down those things that concern you. Do not minimize them. They may be very real and very hard. Then you write down those things that are your responsibility. The first list becomes your prayer list. The second becomes your to-do list. Observe Nehemiah’s two lists:

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Concerns (the prayer list):

- Sanballat is very angry at me.
- The amount of work I have to do is huge.
- Sanballat and his powerful friends are mocking me and trying to discourage me.
- Sanballat and his allies are threatening to attack our city.
- The people I lead are starting to get discouraged.

Responsibilities (the to-do list):

- See God as bigger than my enemies.
- Cry to Him for help.
- Keep building the wall.
- Encourage the workers by pointing them to the power of God.
- Remind the workers why their job is important
- Equip the people to defend themselves.
- Lead by example.