August 17, 2014

Nehemiah 4:1-3; 10; 14-15

Change your world in 52 days: Defeating Discouragement[[1]](#footnote-2)

Rev. Kerry Smith

Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Nehemiah 4:1-3; 10; 14-15 New Revised Standard Version

Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he mocked the Jews. He said in the presence of his associates and of the army of Samaria, “What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore things? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish it in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish—and burned ones at that?” Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, “That stone wall they are building—any fox going up on it would break it down!”

But Judah said, “The strength of the burden bearers is failing, and there is too much rubbish so that we are unable to work on the wall.”

After I looked these things over, I stood up and said to the nobles and 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 kin, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes.” When our enemies heard that their plot was known to us, and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to his work.

Sanballat and Tobiah did everything within their power to stop the work of God’s people. Tobiah mocked Nehemiah. He asked him, if a fox were to climb that wall, would it crumble under his weight? Nehemiah was not deterred and turned to God for strength. How do we defeat discouragement and overcome opposition so we can finish the work God called us to do?

Let me catch you up to speed, Nehemiah is a Jew who was serving as the cup-bearer to the King in Persia. He would taste the wine before the King would drink it to make sure that it was not poisoned. One day Nehemiah found out from his brother that the walls of Jerusalem, his homeland, were still broken down and the gates were burned. Nehemiah was devastated and his heart was broken and he felt like someone should do something about this and it might as well be him. Nehemiah cried when he heard the news about Jerusalem, he knelt down to pray, and then he stood up to act. Nehemiah prayed to God and asked the King for permission to go back and rebuild the walls. To make a difference in this world, you don’t have to be the best, you just have to care the most.

Nehemiah defined his vision clearly, he was going to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Then, Nehemiah made his plans carefully so he could take the vision in steps. And then Nehemiah inspired people passionately and others joined with him to rebuild the walls. And in 52 days working together they rebuilt the walls. We think someone else will change a particular situation. All it takes is one person to stand up and do something about a set of circumstances.

Nehemiah traveled 1000 miles to Jerusalem, surveyed the damage and after 140 years of the walls being down and the hopelessness that symbolized, Nehemiah brought hope. Nehemiah said to the people, we can rebuild the walls, and they made progress. But, opposition showed up. There was Sanballet, Tobiah, and others who were threatened by Nehemiah.

You might think it should have been smooth sailing for Nehemiah because he was doing something that God had called him to do. Surely God would remove all obstacles and there would not be any opposition. But we need to remember we don’t face opposition because we are doing something wrong, we face opposition because we are doing something right. You might be thinking, “I must be doing lots right” because you are facing lots of opposition.

There will be external forces to try to discourage you and cause you to quit. We saw this in the scripture we read, Nehemiah was building the wall and Sanballat and Tobiah showed up to ridicule and discourage all those who were working with Nehemiah. There is opposition from the outside, often seen in obstacles. Two steps forward and three steps back.

Say your mission is to become debt-free in a year. And the very next day your car breaks down. Two steps forward, three steps back.

When there is the first obstacle, we might think well, God must not want us to do this and we stop. We think well, there was an obstacle so God must not be in this even though we felt like God wanted us to do a certain thing. So many God given dreams die at the very first obstacle. For some of us here, we have gone two steps forward and we are facing an obstacle. May we not let an obstacle discourage us from doing what we believe God has called us to do.

We can also face opposition from the outside, with criticism. That is what Sanballat and Tobiah did to Nehemiah. You may get so excited about something that you feel like God is calling you to do, but you face outside criticism. Say that you want to leave your higher paying job because you want to use your gifts and make a difference in the world. You want to take a lower paying job and you tell a friend and they tell you that they think you are making the wrong decision. They ask you why you would take such a financial risk? And you begin to question your decision yourself.

If you want to change the world and make a difference, enduring criticism is a part of leadership. Criticism is a part of leadership. Nehemiah was criticized. Now, Nehemiah didn’t call his people together and say, “Those people are being so mean to me!” Nehemiah did two things. When people criticized Nehemiah and his work, Nehemiah took it to God over and over again. The second thing Nehemiah did was he got back to work. Nehemiah took it to God and he got back to work.

Now we are human beings so yes, it is going to bother us when we are criticized, but we just have to take it to God and get back to work. We answer to God, not to our critics. When we are doing something right, our enemy will oppose us from the outside and from the inside. In verse 10 that we read together, it is Nehemiah’s own people that are criticizing him now, “But Judah said, “The strength of the burden bearers is failing, and there is too much rubbish so that we are unable to work on the wall.”

The people wonder who are we to rebuild these walls that have been down for 140 years? When Nehemiah faces discouragement from the inside, he says in the scripture that we read together, “After I looked these things over, I stood up and said to the nobles and 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 kin, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes.” When our enemies heard that their plot was known to us, and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to his work.”

It reminds me of my favorite passage of scripture from Romans 8:31; 33-39, “What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

How do we defeat discouragement when we face opposition? We are not afraid of opposition, but we remember the Lord who is great and awesome. Nehemiah is saying, remember when our ancestors were slaves? Remember when God delivered us and freed us? Remember when our God raised up one of our own and Moses stood up to Pharoah? Moses knew someone must do something about this and he said it might as well be me. And our great and awesome God sent the ten plagues and split the sea in two so that God’s people could escape Pharaoh and his army.

When I get discouraged, I think of when I applied for a job and I really wanted this particular job. And it was the night before my interview and my sister was trying to encourage me, and she said, “Kerry, you always get everything, you are going to get this job.” And I know she was trying to be helpful, but when I did not get the job, I felt awful. And I psychoanalyzed everything, my sister said that I always got everything, maybe I was too confident in the interview or maybe I didn’t deserve to get this job because I had apparently gotten everything else in my life that I wanted, at least, according to my sister.

In 1920 there was a man named Oswald Smith who wanted to be a missionary more than anything else in the world. He met before the missionary board and they turned him down. Life had given him a detour, and as he prayed, God planted another idea in his heart. If he could go be a missionary, he would build a church which would send out missionaries. And that is what he did. Oswald Smith was the pastor of The People's Church in Toronto, Canada, which sent out more missionaries than any other church at that time. Oswald Smith brought God into the situation, and God transformed his detour into something beyond his dreams.[[2]](#footnote-3)

 This week with the news of Robin Williams’ death, I could not help but think of my stepbrother’s funeral. My stepbrother committed suicide and there was a pastor at the funeral who condemned my stepbrother and encouraged those of us listening to not choose the path that my stepbrother had taken. And I remembered God. I remembered the God who loves us, the God who hurts when we hurt, the God who embraces us and loves us all the time. We cannot know what those who take their life are going through. We must not criticize. Instead, we must remember the God who loves us.

When you’re discouraged, remember. Think back to when God provided, when God protected, when God prompted your heart. When you are discouraged, remember the Lord. And get back to work. Fight for your cause, fight for something beyond yourself, for someone else. Nehemiah said to fight for your brothers, your sister, your sons, your daughters, your homes. What are you going to fight for? Your relationships? Your family? Nehemiah tells us to fight for something beyond yourself.

Do you feel like you are facing obstacles? Discouraged? Two steps forward, three steps back? Today I pray for those whose finances are out of control, for those who have health problems, for those whose relationships are struggling. I pray that we all may be encouraged. In the midst of obstacles and criticism, may we be encouraged. May we all remember God, remember God’s goodness, God’s protection, God’s blessings. May we all see the many ways that God is sustaining and strengthening us to overcome obstacles. And may we remember we don’t face opposition because we are doing something wrong, we face opposition because we are doing something right.

1. This sermon series is taken from http://open.lifechurch.tv [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Brian L. Harbour, Rising Above the Crowd, <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/d/disappointment.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)