

Nehemiah 4:10-23 "Don't Leave The Building For The Battle"

Shall we open our Bibles this morning to Nehemiah 4:10 as we continue our study through this wonderful book?

Nehemiah continues the story of Israel's repatriation from captivity in Babylon back to Jerusalem. In fact, this book is one of the last historical books that you have in the Old Testament that really takes you almost to the time of those years of silence where you really aren't told much between those 400 years or so until the time of John the Baptist appearing and God's beginning to do that work in the New Testament. This book really takes us back to the captivity in Babylon for the southern kingdom of Judah, where they were kept for seventy years because of idolatry. And the LORD had promised that He would one day send them back, and when Cyrus, the Medo-Persian king, took over, though he was named 150 years before he was born (by Isaiah), he did the very thing that God said - he offered the Jews safe passage back home. About 50,000 folks, in 536 B.C., took advantage of that; ninety-one years later, the fellow, Ezra (who is the book right before this one) took about 2,000 more folks back, mostly worship leaders and priests. Twelve years later, in 445 B.C., Nehemiah shows up to rebuild the walls that had been down now for 161 years.

So, Nehemiah is an interesting guy because he is a man born in captivity, a Jewish man who has never seen Jerusalem, and yet he has a heart to want to serve the people and bring honor back to God's city. It is a book about calling, about planning, about praying, about how God takes one individual, and He uses him to not only move a nation of people but to accomplish much in those people's lives. It is a book about getting vision and sharing vision and having to fight against the opposition that you face.

Last week we finished in chapter 4 and saw that the walls were halfway finished and that the "people had a mind to work." They were faithful..... But this morning we want to pick up the story in verse 10 as we continue to watch this work unfold, a work that has, like I said, laid there for four generations, and now there's a man there willing to work and to do the work of God. We've entitled the message this morning (through the end of chapter 4) "Don't Leave The Building For The Battle" because we learned last week (in fact the last few weeks) that God's work is most

often done while opposition rules or while opposition reigns. There is always this pushback when you are serving the LORD, and it can lead to great discouragement. And I think much of the chapter this morning is about discouragement, so if you've ever been discouraged, this might be for you. If you're an eternal optimist, you can go home now. (Laughing) But otherwise you should probably hang out.

Verse 10 says this, "Then Judah said, 'The strength of the laborers is failing, and there is so much rubbish that we are not able to build the wall.'" Back in verse 6, we had read last week that the wall was halfway to its height. They were halfway done when the enemy really began to conspire (verse 8) to attack Jerusalem and create confusion, and they had to set a watch and prayed for God to watch over them. And then we get to verse 10, and we see the nation - Judah itself - saying to each other, "Yeah, we're not going to be able to do this." It is certainly never easy to maintain your faith as a believer when everything seems to be working against you, when the opposition is there, when there is a harassment to the work involved. Paul, when he wrote to the Corinthians, made a whole list of things that he had been going through in ministry, and he said (2 Corinthians 4:8-10), "We are pressed on every side, but we haven't been crushed. And we're perplexed, but we're not in despair. We're persecuted, but God hasn't forsaken us. We're struck down, but we're not destroyed. We're carrying around in our bodies, everywhere we go, the dying of Jesus." In other words, "We're suffering for His sake, but as a result, the life of Jesus can be made known in us."

So, there is something about the battle, and it should comfort you to know that guys like Paul or Nehemiah, godly men - examples that we would look up to, have all had to kind of be dogged in their steps by an enemy that doesn't want to see the work get done. So don't think it too strange when you're wanting to walk with God that opposition tends to raise its ugly head. The minute you make a turn for the LORD, there's someone there to impede your progress. I don't think that there's an easy road in serving the LORD. I think most of it probably is uphill.

Up to now, everything has been accomplished despite the enemy. The ominous threats, though, were a little bit more challenging, and there was something else as well. The work was hard, and the laborers began to be hindered. But notice it was a mutual outlook. Verse 10, "Judah said." It wasn't one person that was discouraged. The whole group was kind of down. Additionally, many of those believers in the camp were echoing the words of the enemy. You might remember from last week (back in verse 2) that the talk was that the Jews were feeble, that

the work was great, that there was no way they were going to finish it, that the stones were a big heaping pile of rubbish. They had been burned down. There was nothing, really, that they could accomplish. And then notice (in verse 10) it is the exact mirror of what they said in verse 2. They are now talking like the enemy. They are taking on the enemy's outlook when it came to the work of God. If you just divorce yourself from the emotion or the involvement, you would say, "Look, common sense would say you're halfway done. That means you're a whole lot more done than you were." But it isn't always so commonsensical. It seems like we can lose common sense when it comes to spiritual battles. Halfway finished. Sometimes it is the hardest place to be, isn't it? Verse 6, halfway finished. Halfway finished. You ever try to lose weight, and you're about halfway there? And all of a sudden those Boston crème donuts look good? Because you've lost a lot of weight, so you'll be all right. Or you start exercising, and, "I'm gonna get in shape," and two days later, everything hurts, and you decide, "This is ridiculous! Why should I do this? I hurt for a month, and now I'm supposed to feel better? I don't feel better at all." Halfway done. Driving somewhere.....if you have to drive a long way. I remember the kids, when they were little, used to say, "Are we there yet?" "We're about halfway there." "Oh, not halfway there. It's forever away." Lose the weight you want, do the exercise you like. It seems that most people stop loving their new car about when it's halfway paid off. (Laughing) Right? The new smell goes away, but the bills keep coming in the mail.

There's this initial excitement, and there was for these folks. You go back and read when Nehemiah showed up how excited everyone was. But they don't sound like that at all now because the work ahead is equal to the work that would still have to be accomplished, and they remember how hard it was to get halfway done. And so the road seems very long. I'm always watching young Christians. They come out of the gate just blazing. They get a big Bible, they get bumper stickers, they get a witness shirt, they're at church all the time. And then they go, "You gotta do this how long?" "Yeah, the rest of your life." "The whole life?" It's not a sprint. It's a marathon, walking with God, isn't it? And it isn't for the faint of heart. It's for the plodder who just kind of keeps moving along. When the LORD took Moses, and He said to them (in the wilderness), "Follow Me around the way of the Red Sea," and you read in Numbers 21 that the people, because of the difficulty of the journey, were discouraged in their souls - if you read God's reasoning, it was so that He might keep them from a group of people that they weren't ready to face. The road was difficult, but oh, man, they'd have been wiped out had they gone any other way. The LORD had chosen the best path for them, but it was still a

discouraging way. It was a hard path to follow. God was leading them around trouble, protecting them, but the road turned out to be long. I guess Numbers 21:4 could read, "If you only knew what was waiting for you.....it could be a whole lot worse." But they didn't know that.

I think that, trying to put myself in the shoes of these workers, I would suspect that cleaning out every bit of garbage before you could build was just endless. Prep work is not fun, is it? When you finally get to paint, that's fun. But the sanding and the priming and the patching.....or if you're building a new building, for weeks it's just underground work. Come on. Build the thing already! But you want electrical, you want plumbing, you want all kinds of stuff. You just don't get to see it. And this takes a long time, and it shows little progress, and I would say there's a spiritual equivalent to that in our lives. You're told to go to church and to get your Bible out and go share your faith and to know the LORD and spend some time in prayer. And it all seems to be prep work until I need an answer to prayer or I need God to use me in something. But now I'm ready.

So the wall is halfway to its designed height, which means that the next part of the wall means putting bricks over your head and mortar overhead. It's going to be harder work. And then the trash is piling up, and the enemy wants to kill us, and discouragement is setting in.

And notice what we read about discouragement - because it's pretty typical - in verse 10. Number one - they see themselves having a loss of strength. "The strength of the laborers is failing." "We can't do this anymore!" How true in our Christian lives. Early on, when you get saved.... and I talked to a guy this week - he's been saved three weeks. I've never met a more excited guy. And I thought to myself, "Would to God that everyone in church was this excited for Jesus." But I remember that. I remember those days. Don't you? When we used to come to church an hour early just to find someone to pray with. Now I watch people roll in ten minutes late. And the minute I say, "Let's pray," I open my eyes, there they go so they can be the first one out the driveway. It's not exactly the same. Our strength has failed. Something has changed about us. We're not able to do the work anymore. It's like growing up, but growing up is not always so grown up, is it? We've learned the life of a believer is a battle, that it isn't easy, and so what do I do? I make life easy. I give in to my flesh. I don't want to struggle. But if you don't build a good foundation, you're never going to be protected. And here's some hard labor, man. Growing up as a Christian is hard work. It's not easy. You get

weary of Bible study, you get weary of prayer, you get weary of self-denial, you get tired of the slow progress. But the root's got to go down if the fruit's going to come up. And sometimes I get tired of making the effort to what seems is little progress. But there's the enemy at every step, "Who are you kidding, anyway? You're not going to ever do well. You can't do this." It's like letting the air out of the balloon. They were all singing the halfway done blues. "We've run outta gas." Discouraged because they feel like they've lost their strength.

They've also (verse 10) lost their vision. "There is so much rubble." Now, when I go back to read about the meeting that they had with Nehemiah, everyone was excited and put their hand to this good work of God. And "the people had a mind to work," we read last week. When your eyes are on the LORD, work is exciting. But when you see just the difficulty, just the rubbish, and it's half of what it used to be (it was twice there before), it's the old cup half empty or half full. But their focus had changed. And I would say to you, if you're discouraged, sometimes it's because you're seeing the problem more than the God that you serve, and you can find yourself losing your vision. Your eyes get off the LORD. You know, a new mom, when she has a new baby, is just so excited. We've had a couple of folks have kids the last couple of months, and it's fun to watch how excited they are. "I can't wait to get the baby home." And they bring him home to that newly-built nursery that's beautiful and just the way it should be, and they want to wake the baby up from a nap just to look in its eyes. But eventually, fifty diapers a day later, this bundle of joy that has become a poop machine (Laughing) is only cute when it's sleeping (Laughing). And you've lost the vision. Or newlyweds....."Oh, we can't wait to live together!" Until she finds out that his idea of living together is throwing his underwear behind the door, laying on the couch for record numbers of hours. And the vision becomes a nightmare, (Laughing) and then you wake up to the reality. Hey, there's a reality for walking with God. It's not going to be easy. It's going to be an enemy. We get saved, and we can't wait to tell someone about what Jesus has done, and then the reality hits that most people are going to react with negative attitudes. They're going to refuse to hear what God has been doing in your life, and you're less motivated to try it again. Or you used to be so hungry for the things of God, but now you come to church as an obligation rather than as a privilege. You're driven not by hunger but by, "Oh, I should do that." Guilt. Not exactly the same as it used to be. And here you find, halfway home, they're dying in their places. They've lost their strength, they believe. They've lost their vision, for sure. And here's the enemy who's robbing them of the joy of the LORD or

being halfway done because they've lost their focus, and they see the difficulties more than they see the LORD that has brought them this far.

And notice, at the end of verse 10, they've lost all confidence. "We're not able to do this." "Our strength is failing, there is much rubbish, we can't. We just can't!" Waning faith. "The hurrier I go, the behinder I get." Right? It is a good time, in spiritual life, to sometimes go back and read verses like Galatians 6:9 where the LORD said, "Don't get wear in well doing. Don't get tired of it. Because in due season you're going to reap if you don't lose heart." Or Paul writing, in his very last letter to Timothy (to a man that is now in his forties but yet in his first pastoral role, if you will), from death row, writes to Timothy (2 Timothy 3:14), "Just continue in the thing that you've learned and been assured of and that you've known since you learned them as a kid. The things you've known about the Scriptures are going to be able to make you wise through salvation and faith in Christ. Timothy, don't give up now! Hang on to what you've known and what you've learned." Yet just thinking about pursuing those things necessary for spiritual growth, and it just feels like the battle begins in earnest..... "I can't!" That's what we hear from people sometimes. "I can't!" You commit yourself to praying a little bit more, and the minute you do, the phone's going to ring, or your mind's going to wander, or some long lost friend is going to drop by unexpectedly. You decide to go to church during the week, "I'm going to start going to church during the week, I'm going to commit myself to spiritual growth," and immediately your work says you'll need to stay late, there's an emergency. Or your kids will announce that there's a six-month project due tomorrow that they forgot to tell you about. Or soccer practice now is on Wednesdays as well. Or there're other things - you're tired, the car is out of gas, the BBQ went too late, I've got to shop for groceries - and it all has to be done during that hour you could be going to church. There's a battle. "I can't do it! I quit." And people do quit.

Jesus, when He told the parable about the great supper (Luke 14:16), said that He had sent the folks out to say, "Go tell those that have been invited that the supper is ready. Come. Everything is ready." And it says, "They all, with one accord, began to make excuses." And one said, "Well, I just bought a piece of ground. I should go look at it." Which isn't that a silly argument? "I just bought a house, I should probably go look at it." Maybe you should look at it before you buy it. Another guy said, "Well, I just bought five yoke of oxen. I should go test out to see if they work." Modern translation, "I just bought a truck, I hope it can pull the boat." "Did you try it?" "No. Didn't." Another guy said, "I just got married, I

can't come." The old Adam and Eve argument. And then the Lord said, "Well, then, just go into the byways. Whoever wants to come can come." "Lord, I can't." There's the old, "I can't. I just can't."

And Satan's opposition to your spiritual well-being will take lots of forms, but it always has just one singular purpose, and the purpose is very clear - just keep you from building the wall, keep you from living your life in a place that God can use you. And Satan knows about 50%, I guess, because he sure throws it in their faces, and the attacks come with a renewed vigor.

Verse 11, we hear the children of Israel saying, "And our adversaries said, 'They will neither know nor see anything, till we come into their midst and kill them and cause the work to cease.' So it was, when the Jews who dwelt near them came, that they told us ten times, 'From whatever place you turn, they will be upon us.' " It had been sarcasm and jeers, and now it became personal threats of attack; a concerted effort from the enemy that is now, notice - and I want you to notice, repeated by the workers. Notice verse 11, "And our adversaries said" and "they have said" (verse 12). They're quick to point out that the information is being driven to the hearts of the people that are working through the lives of others who are working with them. I don't doubt that this kind of threat hanging over your head would wear you out, would take a lot of your drive away. "Somewhere, somehow, when you least expect it, you're going to die!" Not so exciting now to serve the LORD. Now there's a cost involved. "I thought it was easy. I love just singing, 'Alleluia,' my hands raised. Seems like there's more to it now than that." Psalm 112:7 says this, "He who walks with God is not afraid of evil tidings. The LORD's my help, who should I fear?"

But notice, in verse 12, that some of Nehemiah's own work team became the conduits for the enemy to spread his threats. And not once or twice. Notice Nehemiah writes "ten times." The lies of the enemy were being repeated and embraced. And I want you to know who they're coming from. They are coming from those in the body who live closest to the enemy. You see that? The conduit came from those who were living closest to the enemy, those "who dwelt near them." Not just physically but someone who is far enough away from the LORD and close enough to the world to be the conduit where they bring into the church the world's philosophies and outlooks and fears and concerns. They became the voice, they became stumbling blocks, they became tools of the enemy. They brought negative outlooks and words of discouragement, and they said it time and again,

"Oh, they told us. Watch over your shoulder, man. Be careful at night. Look over. Watch out. Go out in pairs. Be careful." You have to ask yourself - am I a tool of the enemy when it comes to my life in the church or a voice for God's Spirit?

Verse 13 tells us, "Therefore I positioned men behind the lower parts of the wall," (where they, maybe, could come in easier) "at the openings; and I set the people according to their families, with their swords, their spears, and their bows. And I looked, and arose and said to the nobles, to the leaders, and to the rest of the people, 'Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, great and awesome, and fight for your brethren, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses.' And it happened, when our enemies heard that it was known to us, and that God had brought their plot to nothing, that all of us returned to the wall, everyone to his work." Reassigning work assignments. Moving some people from building to guarding, I suspect, slowed down the work, but it didn't stop it. Teamwork. "We've got to do this together." A watch set day and night. A guard set where the easiest access was to the city itself. And then I like verse 14. Notice (of Nehemiah) it says he looked, and then he arose, and then he spoke. He spoke to the leaders, he spoke to the nobles, and he spoke to the people. "I looked, I arose, and I spoke." Nehemiah's a good leader. He's aware of what's going on. He assesses the needs. He knew that the will of God was to build, that God was great. He looked at all that was going on, and he said to the people this, "Just remember the LORD. What are you guys doing? You're afraid because you forgot the LORD." The sons of Korah saying it this morning (Psalm 42:5), "Why are you so downcast, my soul? Why are you so disquieted within me? Hope in God. I yet shall praise Him for the help of His countenance." They'd forgotten God. I would say to you that if you are discouraged this morning, remember God. Because what you remember about God, and what He has done, will certainly keep you in the ways that you go. Everything depended upon Him and still did. "Go fight for your kids, go fight for your family, go fight for your life." It's a fight worth engaging yourself in. It's a commitment worth doing. To neglect building the wall was to forego their peace and their joy and their hope. Satan would have his way of killing and stealing and destroying. Their influence would be stopped. But they were encouraged. Nehemiah - one guy, "Come on, man! We've come this far with the LORD, let's go!"

And notice (in verse 15) that, in the end, the aid of the LORD and the encouragement of His Word and of His leader put the plot to shame. The enemy suffers a setback. The people are determined, at all costs, to move forward.

"So it was, from that time on," verse 16, "that half of my servants worked at construction, while the other half held the spears, the shields, the bows, and wore armor; and the leaders were behind all the house of Judah. Those who built on the wall, and those who carried burdens, loaded themselves so that with one hand they worked at construction, and with the other held a weapon. Every one of the builders had his sword girded at his side as he built. And the one who sounded the trumpet was beside me. Then I said to the nobles, the rulers, and the rest of the people, 'The work is great and extensive, and we are separated far from one another on the wall. Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us.' So we labored in the work, and half of the men held the spears from daybreak until the stars appeared. At the same time I also said to the people, 'Let each man and his servant stay at night in Jerusalem, that they may be our guard by night and a working party by day.' So neither I, my brethren, my servants, nor the men of the guard who followed me took off our clothes, except that everyone took them off for washing." Verses 16, 17, and 18 - be committed to the fight, get busy for the armor, watch yourself. When you get to Ephesians 6, Paul starts to talk about the armor of God that we can wear in the battle against the enemy. And in your hand, this morning, is the sword of God's Spirit. So you might fight the enemy. And, by the way, your enemy's not your husband or your wife or your neighbor or your employee. There's a devil.

And notice that building is more important than the battle. And we started by saying, "Don't Leave The Building For The Battle." Obviously, there're battles. They never go away. But in the midst of that, the positive is you get work done. I talk to people sometimes, "Hey, you gonna get involved?" And they go, "Oh, my life is.....I'm going through so much stuff," and they just give a hundred excuses why all they can barely do is battle. Never get anywhere. They just are beaten down. And yet you can't stop building for the battle. The walls of your life, spiritually, have to go up if you're going to be a witness. You can't stay out of fellowship just because you're fighting. You can't stay out of building. If Satan can reduce your life to battling alone, nobody gets saved, no lives are touched, no missionaries go forward. If he can keep you from investing in your spiritual well-being through study and prayer and faithfulness to God and plugging yourself into the church, he'll do it, and you'll have a story to tell, but you'll never have accomplishment to mention. You can't replace building with just battling. Wesley went to prison five times for preaching, and yet the Methodist revival raged during his life. They couldn't slow him down. It cost him plenty. And Nehemiah saw that "the work is great," and I love these last few verses where he said to them, as he spread out,

"Look, we'll have a central calling system. If there's trouble anywhere, we'll blow the trumpets, and you guys all come running." And then he said this, "Our God will fight for us." Now, see how he mixes the two together? "You come running with your sword and fight, and God will fight for us." God works through the body. He works through God's people. So focus on the Commander. Serve Him. One day the LORD will blow the trumpet, and we'll be out of here, and that'll be the end of the enemy for us.

Notice that he calls upon (in the last three verses) people to make selfless devotion for one another. It's hard enough to do this battle, but now you've got to sleep in town. There weren't any houses. This was hard on everyone! Tireless commitment. Emergency needs required emergency responses. This was temporary, but they'd have to do it together. You know, the Bible doesn't make any provision for loners. If you look at this picture, you can't get by on your own. "Don't forsake the assembling of yourselves together" (Hebrews 10:25).

So, the discouragement was one where their eyes were off the LORD, and when their eyes were off the LORD, certainly everything that they saw was discouraging. They didn't have strength, they didn't have vision, they didn't have any confidence. They were just downcast. The threats were being passed along into the church or into the body, if you will, by the body itself. They were listening to the enemy. You live close enough to the world, man, not only are you going to be a discouragement to everyone else, you're not going to ever be encouraged yourself. I would say hang around God's people. Speak God's Word. Share with each other God's promises. That's where life is. The world'll chew you up and spit you out. That's the way the world works. Always has. But we don't want to live there. We don't want to say our strength is failing, there's much rubbish, we can't do it. We can! There's a battle, but the building's got to continue, doesn't it?

Next week, in chapter 5, we will run into a new enemy - those within the body itself that are selfish and self-serving and taking advantage of others when they should be committing themselves to the good of the whole. It's a great chapter. You won't want to miss it. Read ahead - all of nineteen verses, you should be all right.

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
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