

NEHEMIAH – FACT SHEET 3



Chapter 4 & 6:

Nehemiah's surroundings have changed drastically. He is no longer in Persia, but Jerusalem. He no longer has the comfortable role as Cupbearer to Artaxerxes; but is the project manager on a building project, in a city he had previously never seen. Chapters 2 & 3 have seen the building work start well – God's people working together, families, those needing a fresh start, even those who would not directly benefit – those from Tekoa, Jericho and other places.

Yet whenever God is at work, the enemy is at work too. The first verse of chapter 4 re-introduces us to Sanballat (Administrator of Samaria). Against the progress of God's work – Sanballat has moved from general concern (2:10) through ridicule & accusation (2:19) and now onto anger, being 'greatly incensed' (4:1). As the Lord's work progresses, the enemies attacks often also intensify – our battle in 'not against flesh and blood' (Eph 6:12).

In the attacks against the progress of God's work, here in chapters 4 & 6, we can see:

The DIVERSITY of discouragement:

In verse 2, we see how one verse, sometimes one sentence, can attack the core of our well being, ambition and progress in the Lord. Discouragement can:

- Be **personal** – 'feeble Jews';
- Crush our **ambitions** – 'will they restore their walls?'
- Mock our **vision** – 'will they offer sacrifices?'
- Dent our **enthusiasm** – 'will they finish in a day?'
- Undermine our **confidence** – 'can they bring these stones back to life?'
- Magnify our **problems** – 'those stones – burned as they are'

Then as is often the case, we see the little, contributing taunts of others. In verse 3, Tobiah's sick, unfunny joke, is typical how the enemy can use little things to endeavour to tip God's people over the edge, to discourage them from building for Him. Alone, such a statement could be well defended and probably ignored – however, on top of the personal and crushing onslaught of Sanballat – this adds insult to injury. Later archaeological excavation of the walls of Nehemiah, found them to be 9ft thick. It would have taken more than a few hefty foxes to knock these walls down.

Chapters 4 & 6 also show us the **DIRECTION** of discouragement – coming initially in these chapters, from **without**:

We have already seen the escalating tactics of the enemy – not just verbally, but a physical threat now ensues in the form of the Samaritan army (4:2) enlisted by Sanballat and his associates. There are always plenty of people willing or vulnerable to recruitment against God's plans. As the building work continues despite such opposition, the focus later shifts to the leadership – if the enemy could bring Nehemiah down, then surely this would 'snap the main mast' of the good ship 'Jerusalem'.

As the building work continues in chapter 6 – Sanballat tries to distract Nehemiah from his focus, offering to meet with him (6:2). However, Nehemiah, aware of their plans, refuses to be distracted. This leads to both a political (6:5-7) and a religious (6:10-12) attempt at discrediting Nehemiah. Sanballat's empty accusations of Nehemiah's political ambition then lead to him hiring a priest to lead Nehemiah into spiritual misconduct by entering the most Holy place within the temple – an accusation that could easily be made had Nehemiah shut himself in the temple with only the hired priest to testify (see such a violation in 2 Chron 26:16 by King Uzziah). Opposition and distraction from God's purposed work can also come in very 'religious' disguises.

Discouragement can also come from **within**:

With such an increased onslaught of verbal taunts, accusation and potential physical threat, those building started to doubt. The drive, vision, passion, coupled with a trust in their awesome God of Heaven, had got them thus far. However, pessimism can so often be a bigger threat than atheism to the progress of God's work. In the face of such opposition, the people's strength starts to give out and they start to believe that they 'cannot rebuild the wall' (4:10). Others amongst them, family members and close friends, also emphasise the danger and threats (4:11-12). Seeing and hearing the threats of the enemy can be unifying and can increase our resolve; but seeing the fear and doubt of fellow builders can provoke our own fears too.

Dealing with Discouragement – What should be our approach?:

Chapters 4 & 6 give us **six** wonderful antidotes to discouragement.

Firstly, we see Nehemiah's response to the onslaughts and threats to be a **prayerful** one:

With no introduction, following the first onslaught, Nehemiah prays (4:4) – to the God who 'hears' - 'Hear us O God'. Spiritual leaders pray first! Lead the way in prayer! Intercede in prayer, 'Hear US..'

Nehemiah's prayer is raw, honest and passionate. God knows his situation. Boosted by Nehemiah's example, when faced with further hostility in vs 7-8 – verse 9 tells us, 'but then WE prayed..' However we lead, let us lead our people, those under our care – in prayer!

Nehemiah not only prays for the people, but when under personal attack in chapter 6, verse 9 tell us, '..But I prayed..'. PRAYER is crucial in our personal defence.

William Cowper quotes: "Satan trembles when he sees the weakest saint upon their knees".

Second, we see that **unity** is essential. In chapter 4:13-20, recognising the vulnerable areas, Nehemiah gets everyone involved, whole families included, working together in unity against potential attacks. There's something very unifying and encouraging when God's people all work together.

Thirdly, we need to keep **perspective**. In verse 14 of chapter 4, Nehemiah encourages the people to 'remember the Lord'. It sounds a strange thing to exhort, yet it is easy to forget who is fighting for us, in the midst of trouble and opposition.

Fourthly, Nehemiah ensured that in his report, he gave **God the glory**. When Sanballat's plans were frustrated (yes it took good leadership) – it was ultimately God who should take the credit (4:15).

Fifth, God's people need **vision**, for without which, they perish and cast off restraint (Prov 29:18). So in verse 16 of chapter 4, Nehemiah announces his plan. Again, the practical and spiritual are essential partners in the building up of God's people and work.

Sixth, our lives and conduct ultimately need to be **built upon God's Word**. Nehemiah, knowing God's law and Word, was never going to be tempted to conduct himself contrary to it (6:13).

Conclusion:

When God is at work, we can be sure the enemy is too. God's work can often be sacrificial (4:21-23). As God's people, building for him today, we need to be aware of the potential for discouragement from both 'within' and 'without'; recognising the diverse and damaging tactics of the enemy. Our counter to such an onslaught lies in our six fold approach of constant prayer, a striving for unity, a Godly perspective, remembering it is the Lord who fights for us, giving Him the glory, maintaining our vision – with lives built upon the foundation of His Word.

For further study:

Look at these chapters in scripture – can you see the pattern of God working, closely followed by enemy activity?

Ex 14 & 15

Numbers 14

Judges 15 & 16

1 Kings 19

Acts 2-4

Acts 5

Acts 16

Further Reading/Bibliography – My thanks go to!

- *The Holy Bible – (first of course!)*
- *The Message of Nehemiah, R Brown – IVP*
- *Overcoming challenges, B Hybels – Zondervan*
- *A Passion for Faithfulness, J Packer – Crossway*
- *Ezra & Nehemiah, D Kidner - IVP*

*“Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your Word”
Psalm 119:18*