The Good Work - Part Three

# Winning the War with Discouragement

## (Nehemiah 4:1-23)

We have been in a series of messages talking about “The Good Work” and things that are really foundational to our faith. Today we are in part three of a four-part message series that I pray would be an encouragement to you, because so many times we discover that as God leads us to do something meaningful, something that is good, helpful, and generous, something that would really make a difference in the world, we immediately face obstacles.

I believe this message is applicable to where we are today because many of us are experiencing spiritual resistance. For some of you it may be in the form of doubts and fears about your financial security, it may even be the words of those you love the most, but for every good work you can expect some form of opposition. As we turn to the Word of God in the book of Nehemiah, we are going to discover that Nehemiah encounters opposition as well. He is doing a good work and as soon as he begins to make progress, he encounters spiritual resistance, opposition from the inside and opposition from the outside.

Before we get to the text in chapter four, I want to remind you of the context.

Many years before the Jews had been exiled by the Babylonians, they had been taken as captives out of Jerusalem, and taken to a foreign land. Nehemiah was a descendent of those Jews, now many generations later, who was now serving as cupbearer to King Artaxerxes in Persia. Basically he was a servant to the King and positionally this was a great place to be, but his responsibility was to taste the wine before the king drank it just to make sure it was not poisoned. And so, while he had access to the king, every time he performed his duty there was a chance it would be his last.

One day, Nehemiah heard from his brother, the Bible says in chapter one, verse two, “Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem. They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire" (Nehemiah 1:2-3). And so, when Nehemiah “heard these things” that the city had been destroyed and even now it remained unprotected, his heart was broken. He sat down and wept. For some days he mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven” (Nehemiah 1:4).

Nehemiah knew he had to do something about it, so he prayed: "O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.”

"Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.'

"They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man” (Nehemiah 1:5-11).

And so, Nehemiah prayed before asking the King for permission to go back and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. He said, “If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, so that they will provide me safe-conduct until I arrive in Judah? And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the king's forest, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?" (Nehemiah 2:7-8). And God gave him great favor with the King who granted his requests and sent him back with protection, letters of authority, as well as supplies.

Nehemiah travelled close to a thousand miles back to Jerusalem and after decades of hopelessness he encouraged the people that they could rebuild the walls. The Bible says that the people replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So, they began this good work” (Nehemiah 2:18). And before long they had made progress, but the problem Nehemiah was about to find out is that whenever you move forward, doing something for God, the opposition is sure to show up. In fact, we see examples of this time and time again as the enemy comes to distract God’s people from carrying out his will. For Adam and Eve, it was an evil serpent, Moses had the Pharaoh, David had Saul, Samson had Delilah, Elijah had Jezebel, and for Nehemiah it was Sanballat and Tobiah.

Today I want to talk to you about Winning the War with Discouragement, because whenever you step into the good work that God has called you to do you will face opposition. Whenever you move forward doing something for God you will experience spiritual resistance, and this is what we are going to see in Nehemiah chapter four. It is important to understand that we do not face opposition because we are doing something wrong, we face opposition because we are doing something right. You see, it is when we are doing the good work, doing something that glorifies God, that our spiritual enemy rises up in opposition.

And so, I want to show you in the story of Nehemiah two different ways that our spiritual enemy tries to discourage us and then we’ll let his story inspire us through discouragement. The first thing is that your spiritual enemy will use external forces, things on the outside to try to discourage you and cause you to quit. We can see this in chapter 4 as Nehemiah is building the wall, they’re making progress and the enemy shows up to discourage God’s people. The Bible says in verse one,

“When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews, and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said, "What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble — burned as they are?" Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, "What they are building — if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones!" (Nehemiah 4:1-3).

And so, the people of God were moving forward, they were making progress, when suddenly there was opposition from the outside.

In fact, there are probably some of you right now, who have taken two steps forward and there was some type of resistance, opposition as the enemy attacked, and now you feel like you have taken three steps back. And so, I want to encourage you not to let the obstacles discourage you from doing what you believe God called you to do; because God is calling some of you to step up and commit to church membership, and yet the moment you do you will face opposition. There are some of you whom God is calling you to serve, to tithe, to pray, to show love, to do something for God, and the moment you do you can expect resistance.

Nehemiah steps up and Sanballat and Tobiah come threatening to tear him down, and yet I want you to notice what he doesn’t do. He doesn’t answer, he doesn’t react, because he realizes that they are not important enough for a response and so he ignored them and kept doing the work of God. He does not answer, he doesn’t even try to defend himself, because he understands that he only answers to God. And it’s not easy when people are criticizing you, but reacting to them only validates them, and so instead of engaging on a lower level, Nehemiah turns his attention to heaven and prays.

"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” (Nehemiah 4:4-5).

Now, I know this is not what Jesus meant when he taught us to pray, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44). And so, we recognize that this is not a good example of turning the other cheek, but we remember that Jesus had not taught that yet. However, you can feel the passion of this prayer and realize that when you step out that the opposition is going to step in. You have got to be prepared for that and so in verse six Nehemiah said,

“So, we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart” (Nehemiah 4:6).

When faced with opposition, Nehemiah didn’t respond to them, but instead he prayed and got back to work. However, verse seven says,

“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” (Nehemiah 4:7-8).

The wall continued to go up because the people refused to lower themselves to fight about petty things. They knew that they had a higher calling and so they went to God in prayer, Nehemiah said, “We prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.”

They continued the work, but Nehemiah knew that they needed God’s protection, his provision, and his power, and so he prayed knowing that everything depended on God. And then after praying he rolled up his sleeves and got back to work as if everything depended on him, and so the work continued. But I want you to notice that the enemy changed tactics, the people were making progress when the enemy began to discourage them from the inside.

Verse 10 says, “Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, "The strength of the laborers is giving out. "And there's so much rubble "that we cannot rebuild the wall" (Nehemiah 4:10).

It’s important that we understand that when you’re trying to do something close to the heart of God your spiritual enemy will try to discourage you any way he can. When God leads you to do something of value to him like sharing the gospel or caring for orphans and widows, you will experience resistance from the outside and resistance from the inside. Verse 11 says, those enemies on the outside said, "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” (Nehemiah 4:11). And then, the Jews who lived near them came in verse 12, those on the inside told them over and over, “Wherever you turn, they will attack us" (Nehemiah 4:12). And so, there is going to be a voice of discouragement on the inside saying, “What can you do?” And you are going to face obstacles on the outside. You will be criticized, misunderstood, and you may even begin to doubt yourself because your spiritual enemy wants to stop the work of God.

I wonder if some of you have become tired and discouraged, you’re being attacked because you’re representing Jesus, you’re being opposed because you’re doing something good, and you’re feeling like you can’t do it anymore? I’ll be honest, sometimes I get discouraged, I feel like the strength of the laborers is giving out. And Nehemiah hears the people, he knows they’re getting discouraged, they’re about to give up because they don’t think it can be done. And so, look at how he responds, he says,

“After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "Don't be afraid of them…" (Nehemiah 4:14).

And so, he takes their focus off the enemy, off the work, and he puts their focus back on God. He reminds them that this is not their battle, this battle belongs to the Lord, and so he says,

"Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome…" (Nehemiah 4:14).

Don’t worry about them, don’t listen to what they say, but remember the Lord. In other words, he is reminding them of their history, “Remember the Lord who is great and awesome.” Remember when your fathers were slaves in Egypt and God raised up one man to deliver them. Remember when they were surrounded with the enemy behind them and the sea in front of them. Remember how God parted the waters of the Red Sea and they marched through the Sea on dry ground. Remember how God led them with a pillar of fire at night and a cloud by day. Remember how the Lord fed them with manna from heaven.

Nehemiah says, remember the Lord when you are discouraged. And this is so practical for us today because whenever you are discouraged, you just think back to when God provided, when God protected, or when God showed you favor. Remember the Lord your God who is with you, who is for you, and who will never leave you nor forsake you. You remember if God is for you, who can be against you? You remember, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Christ who loved us. You remember the Lord because all things are possible with our God. Greater is he that is in us than he that is in the world. You remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and…

"Fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes" (Nehemiah 4:14).

In other words, you fight for something beyond yourself, for someone you love, someone who needs you, someone who couldn’t make it without you, because when you fight for someone else, God will give you a strength you could never have on your own. And so, you remember the Lord your God, you fight for your marriage, you fight for your children, you fight for that one child that needs a sponsor, and you keep fighting for the lost who need to find hope in Jesus.

You remember the Lord your God and you fight the good fight of faith. You step out to do the good work that God has called you to do. You put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground (Ephesians 6:13). And then sometime, you do what Nehemiah had the people do in verse 16, he said,

“Half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armor. The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah who were building the wall. Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other, and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked” (Nehemiah 4:16-18).

And so, you resist, you fight like a man or woman of God, and you always pray in the Spirit because that’s what the people of God do.

When the enemy attacks they were ready to fight, but they weren’t going to stop working, because they knew they were doing a good work. Then Nehemiah said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "The work is extensive and spread out, and we are widely separated from each other along the wall” (Nehemiah 4:19). And so, Nehemiah kept a man with a trumpet near him. He told the people, “Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet join us there. Our God will fight for us!" (Nehemiah 4:20).

And I don’t know what or who you are going to fight for, maybe you’re going to fight for the orphans, the children that have been neglected, uncared for and abused; maybe you’re going fight for those children, but you’re not about to surrender to the enemy.

Today I want to encourage you, when your enemy shows up and tries to slow you down and stop the work, you remember the Lord your God and you fight for what God called you to fight for. In fact, the horn is blowing, the trumpet is sounding, and it is time to stand up and fight. Nehemiah said,

“So we continued the work with half the men holding spears, from the first light of dawn till the stars came out. At that time I also said to the people, "Have every man and his helper stay inside Jerusalem at night, so they can serve us as guards by night and workmen by day” (Nehemiah 4:21-22).

I want to encourage you to remain faithful, don’t give up, you can’t give up, because it’s a good work. That is why the Bible says in Galatians chapter 6, verse nine,

“Let us not become weary in doing good, because at the proper time you will reap a harvest if you do not give up” (Galatians 6:9).

And so, you don’t give up, you keep on building, working with one hand and keeping a weapon in the other. One stone after another, faithfully day after day, week after week, we can rebuild the wall because we are better together. Nehemiah said in verse 23,

“Neither I nor my brothers nor my men nor the guards with me took off our clothes; each had his weapon, even when he went for water” (Nehemiah 4:23).

God is using us today and so like Nehemiah, we’re not going to give up, we won’t come down, we won’t let the enemy stop us, slow us down or distract us, because greater is he that is in us than he that is in the world. And so, when they mock us and when they say this and when they say that, we remember the goodness of our God who is great and awesome. We continue to fight the good fight, fighting for the good work, because when you remember who God is and you fight for something outside of yourself, the Spirit of God will give you strength in your weakness. God bless you.

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