

Legacy

Part 5 – Halfway Up

Intro

Last week, we saw Nehemiah rally the people of Jerusalem to begin rebuilding the city walls. One by one, family by family, the people were placed along 40 different sections of the wall. Each person, family, and trade were gathered and stationed together on the wall. Each worked according to their own ability. Despite great opposition, the people remained focused on their task and were able to complete the wall all the way around the city, up to half of its height.

Nehemiah 4

4:1-3

As soon as their adversaries heard that reconstruction on the wall had begun, they gathered together and began questioning, doubting, and ridiculing the Jewish people. Nehemiah [as the one who had been resolved and unmoved by the threats of his enemies on several occasions] does something that almost seems out of character for him. He reacts to their threats.

4:4-5

Hear, O our God, for we are despised. Turn back their taunt on their own heads and give them up to be plundered in a land where they are captives. Do not cover their guilt, and let not their sin be blotted out from your sight, for they have provoked you to anger in the presence of the builders.

Nehemiah asks God to take all of their threats and make them come true – but not for the Jews, but for themselves. He prays for the adversaries to be taken captive, for their sin to not be forgiven. Basically, Nehemiah tells God they should get what’s been coming to them.

And we say, yes, finally Nehemiah is seeking revenge – I knew he couldn’t hold out forever. We want Nehemiah to act petty and publicly, because it makes us feel better when we act in the same manner over lesser things.

However, if we look more closely, Nehemiah’s prayer is not petty...it’s actually holy. He isn’t praying for his own kingdom, his own city, and his precious walls to be saved. Nehemiah isn’t even hoping that his adversaries will disappear so that his job is easier. His prayer isn’t petty, it isn’t selfish, and it isn’t hateful. It is holy anger.

He understands these adversaries are not attacking Nehemiah, they are attacking the name and work of God. And that’s when Nehemiah defends himself publicly – because he isn’t really defending himself; he is defending the great name and reputation of his God.

Jesus & The Temple – Flipping Tables

It’s reminiscent of another holy anger moment from another great man doing the work of God. Jesus was leading his group of men to the temple. Instead of finding people worshipping, he saw people misusing the place and name of God for their own benefit. Merchants were selling religious items to the people as they entered the Temple. They took advantage of people and denigrated the true worship of God.

And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. And he told those who sold the pigeons, "Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade." His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me."
John 2:15-17

Jesus and Nehemiah were not interested in defending themselves. If you read the full accounts of their lives, you will not find petty arguments or public defenses of their character. However, what you will find is a burning desire to protect and proclaim the name and character of God.

So we don't take Nehemiah and Jesus' responses to heap coal onto the heads of our *adversaries* openly and publicly, I want to caution us to be careful:

Jesus' Flipping Tables Isn't an Excuse for Your Online Rants
Relevant Magazine – April 2016

4:7-8

But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and that the breaches were beginning to be closed, they were very angry. And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it.

The Jews had now built the wall all the way around the city, half way up its height. And as soon as their adversaries notice that Nehemiah and the people just might be able to accomplish this task, they amp up their resistance. Their opposition grows.

When the adversaries were first introduced only Sanballat and Tobiah were mentioned. However, as Nehemiah made progressed with his plan, Geshem joined the opposition party. Now that the Jews were showing signs of momentum, their enemies come out in full force – literally from all across the map. The enemies listed reveal that the people were surrounded on all fronts – north, south, east, and west.

In their minds, this show of strength would likely throw the Jews into a sense of chaos and confusion, leading them to despair and disunity.

Same Song, Second Verse

You may be thinking – *this is just the same song, second verse*. And I agree, it is in a way. However, my goal in this series is not to simply pass on by and quickly give you an overview and snapshot of Nehemiah's successes. Everybody does that. Every day we see the *best of life* from everyone of social media. We catch glimpses of life through highlight reels. And while it's life, it's not real life or at least all of life. We don't see the difficult moments that led to the highlight. We miss the grit and determination it took to endure. We don't show the pain and struggle that actually forged us into who we are today. But all of it is us. Every part [the good, the difficult, the failures] is part of making us into who we see standing in front of the mirror – not the one we like to portray and pretend exists. Adversity has as much, or more, to do with who we are than a pain-free existence.

Because here's a reality of life for everyone:

How you respond to adversity *today* determines the kind of legacy you leave for *tomorrow*.

4:9

And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night.

Where Nehemiah spent much of his time in prayer alone, he now gathered the people to pray together. He is reminding the Jews that God is ultimately in control of all things...while at the same time encouraging them to play their part in securing their defenses.

Pray AND Set a Guard. Trust AND Defend. Have Faith AND Work. Belief AND Action.

Pray like it depends on God. Work like it depends on you.
Mark Batterson

And some of us would say, *I'm not sure I completely agree with that – it feels like you're saying all the work depends on us.* You would not be the first to feel that way. James, the brother of Jesus and the leader of the Jerusalem church faced similar a similar discussion.

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?

James 2:14

So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.

James 2:17-18

James says both are necessary. Our faith in God is most important; however, if our actions do not display our belief that God *can* then we are effectively saying we truly believe God *cannot*. Our works/actions display the evidence of our faith and trust in God's ability.

4:10-12

In Judah it was said, "The strength of those who bear the burdens is failing. There is too much rubble. By ourselves we will not be able to rebuild the wall." And our enemies said, "They will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work." At that time the Jews who lived near them came from all directions and said to us ten times, "You must return to us."

However, the people were afraid. They were overcome with discouragement. The emotion and excitement of being part of something great had begun to fade.

The people had built the wall to half of its height, which was an incredible feat. But it's also a very dangerous place. It's at that point we look back and see how far we have come and how much it took to get here – and then we look forward [in front us] and realize just how much more we still have to go. And in that moment, many of us grow complacent or weary. The task seems insurmountable. The end too far in the distance. The adversary just too great.

And the people inside the walls began doubting their ability and God's provision. Isn't it true that sometimes the greatest enemy is not what's outside the walls, but what's happening on the inside? Often times, what snuffs out a dream or a vision or a movement has little to do with adversity from without than it does from disunity or doubt from within.

4:13-20 - Reinforcement

So Nehemiah does what every great leader does. He doubles down: on their defenses and motivation.

Nehemiah reinforces their armor and stations people in the weakest gaps of the wall. From that day forward, he divided up the servants – half of whom worked on the construction and half of who carried spears, shields, bows, and armor. Those tasked with carrying large stones did so with one hand on the stone and the other hand on their weapon. The builders had both hands on the work of rebuilding, but their sword strapped to their side ready for battle.

He also reminds them of their motivation. *We are not doing this for ourselves. This defining moment is for our brothers and sisters. This single act of courage is for our wives and daughters. This change in the world is for our kids and their kids. No, we don't do this for ourselves.*

4:15

When our enemies heard that it was known to us and that God had frustrated their plan, we all returned to the wall, each to his work.

When the enemy discovered we might have waived, but never faltered. When our adversaries realized we fully relied on our great God, their plan crumbled. They knew that we would not be dissuaded from trusting in Him and we would not be discouraged from repairing the wall.

4:21-23

So we labored at the work, and half of them held the spears from the break of dawn until the stars came out. I also said to the people at that time, "Let every man and his servant pass the night within Jerusalem, that they may be a guard for us by night and may labor by day." So neither I nor my brothers nor my servants nor the men of the guard who followed me, none of us took off our clothes; each kept his weapon at his right hand.

People worked and then slept at the wall. They didn't change their clothes [except probably to wash them from time-to-time]. There were no 8-5 days. No lunch breaks. No *me time*. Day after day. Hour by hour. Nehemiah, who had come from wealth and luxury and comfort was now sleeping in his clothes, working in the dirt, and sacrificing his reputation.

The work that Nehemiah had been called to do, literally kept him up all night. What is it for you, what has gripped your heart so tightly and burdened you so deeply that it literally keeps you up at night?

Why don't you do something about it? Is it because you are too afraid of the adversity that stands before you? Are you discouraged by what's happening around? Is it costing you more than expected? Will you commit to doing the hard work of seeing it through to completion?

Here's what we all know:

Anything of Great Significance Takes Great Sacrifice