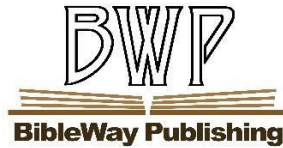


God's Rebuilding Process



DEALING WITH DISCOURAGEMENT

Steve Flatt



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DEALING WITH DISCOURAGEMENT

When a good work for God is in progress, you can be sure that Satan is going to do absolutely everything he can to defeat it. Now what better way to defeat than by simply getting God's people to quit. Nehemiah has been praying about this. He has prepared the people. He has organized the people and great things are happening. "So, we rebuilt the wall until all of it reached half its height: for the people worked with all their heart (had a mind to work –NKJV)." (Neh. 4:6)

Isn't that amazing? Fifty-two days into the project, it's halfway finished. Incredible progress! You can be sure the old devil won't leave them alone. He is going to try to get them to throw in the towel, or in their case, throw in the trowel. How did Nehemiah respond to get the people out of that discouragement?

Catalyst for discouragement—these things the devil uses to bring it on.

1. Ridicule. "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 these 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) Did you notice that they were ridiculing a) the people themselves – "those feeble Jews," those people who have come from slavery; b) their religion – "will they offer sacrifices"? You may wonder what that has to do with sacrifices. He's saying, "Aw, they are sacrificing people—they are so religious. Maybe they think they can burn some calf or some lamb and the wall will be rebuilt;" and c) their work – "if a fox were to walk up on top of what they were building, it would crumble underneath."
2.
What does ridicule do? It makes one doubt who they are and what they can do. Ridicule is always the substitute for reason. If people cannot reason you out of a position, then they will just fall back to something more primal. They will just make fun of you. They'll ridicule you. People who ridicule are always afraid. They are afraid you will succeed and they won't. It's Satan's tool.
2. Resistance. "But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the men of Ashdod heard that the repairs to Jerusalem's wall had gone ahead and that the gaps were being closed. They were very angry." You see the ridicule didn't stop them. "They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it." (Nehemiah 4:7-8) Now the idea here is not an all-out war. What Sanballat, Tobiah, and all the enemies have in mind here is terrorism—guerilla warfare. It's like a couple of you may be working on the wall and on your way home one night, lo and behold, somebody comes out of the bushes and you don't see those workers anymore. So be on your guard because we are going to send snipers to pick you off one at a time. It is a psychological warfare. In a moment we are going to see what Nehemiah did to counteract that.

3. Rumor. "Meanwhile the people in Judah said, 'The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall'. Also, our enemies said, 'Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them, and we will kill them and put an end to the work. Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over wherever you turn, they will attack.'" (Nehemiah 4:10-12) Oh, two characteristics about rumor jumped off those pages at me:

a) Rumors are spread by those who are closest to the enemy. "The Jews who lived near them said." Whenever you encounter one who spreads rumor to thwart or to dismantle a great work of God, you can be confident that they're not far from the enemy camp, spiritually as well as logistically.

b) Rumors are always exaggerated as they repeat it. "The Jews told us ten times over." They just get bigger and bigger and bigger and out of control.

So, these are the things that Satan uses to start up discouragement, ridicule and resistance and rumor. Isn't it interesting that Satan's tactics haven't changed very much, have they? He really doesn't have any new weapons. It's the same old stuff he uses today. We'll see that the Jews became quite discouraged. Why? Why were they so susceptible to these old tricks of Satan?

Circumstances were right for discouragement.

1. They were near exhaustion. "The strength of the laborers is giving out." (Nehemiah 4:10) They were haggard, they were worn out. Situations always seem more hopeless when you are dead tired. They were near the point of exhaustion and they were nowhere near completion.

Elijah the great prophet of God, in one of the great chapters of the Bible, does battle with Ahab and Jezebel and over 800 prophets are wiped out. Then Elijah comes down off Mt. Carmel and he tucks his cloak up into his belt and he outruns Ahab (who by the way was on a chariot). Eighteen miles to Jezreel. "Elijah goes out under a tree for no apparent reason and he says God, there's nobody but me, just take my life. I don't want to live." He's as depressed as all get-out. Do you want to know the great spiritual counsel that God gave Elijah on that occasion? He says, "Elijah, get up, get something to eat, and take a nap." Elijah did and when he got up God told him the second time "Elijah, get something else to eat. Go sleep some more." (1 Kings 19) Satan knows a tired worker is more easily discouraged and that's where the Jews were.

"The people in 52 days built the wall to half its height." But you know what I think the key is there? Half its height! You know, those first bricks were easy. But now the new had worn off and this place was a mess. I don't know if you have noticed it or not, but I find that half way is a hard place in life. Some of you may be runners so you know the hardest time in a race is the half-way point. You've not gotten your second wind yet, you are as tired as can be and it can't help but cross your mind "I've got as far to go as I've already come." It's a terribly, terribly depressing moment. If you're not a runner, surely, you've been on a family vacation and almost as soon as the car gets out of the driveway, the kids are asking, "Are we there yet?" They ask you all along the way, but the worse point is when you have driven for hours and it

comes again, "Are we there yet?" "No, we're about half way." Oh, no—half way? Hey, Satan knows that half way is a psychologically difficult time and you want all the rubble taken away. It just doesn't work like that!

The Jews got discouraged because the circumstances were right. Satan saw it and sent those little catalyst units to ignite the real causes of discouragement, ridicule, resistance and rumor. They are the external forces. The real cause for discouragement is not external. It is internal. Satan will use external things to prime the pump, but our discouragement comes from inside. The Jews had two internal things that caused their discouragement.

2. Inappropriate fear. The Jews had allowed themselves to become bewildered and intimidated. They allowed the seeds of doubt to be sown and when the seeds of doubt are sown, a harvest of despair is inevitable. "What I feared has come upon me." (Job 3:25) From the beginning of time, God knew the problem that fear would pose for all humankind. That may be the reason He put 350 verses in the Bible that begin with the words "Fear not." If you are a child of God, the only thing you really have to fear is fear itself. It will destroy you. Those Jews had an inappropriate fear.
3. Inadequate faith. The real source of the problem was they were trying to build this wall without an awareness of spiritual realities. They got tired, worn out, and discouraged because they were trying to build a great wall instead of trying to build a wall for a great God. There is a big difference. They made a big mistake. You see, this was not their wall. This was God's wall. When God owns something, even the gates of Hell can't prevail against it. If they had kept those two things in mind, they would have had nothing to fear. Our God is for us, and this is His wall. Their discouragement would have been at a very low level.

The cure for discouragement

We've all been there and done that. Some of you are in the depths of discouragement right now. The crucial test of leadership is keeping momentum through the valleys. That's true when you are talking about the business you may run, the team you coach, the school you operate, the church over which you are an elder over or the family of which you are a parent of. The real test of leadership is how you keep the momentum going when everybody seems to be getting discouraged around you.

1. Adjusted their focus. The Israelites are scared, they are discouraged, they are ready to quit. In verse 14, he said, "After I look things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, 'Don't be afraid of them, remember the Lord, who is great and awesome.'" (Nehemiah 4:14) Good speech Nehemiah! Great first line. You see, Nehemiah knew that the real problem wasn't Tobiah. The real problem wasn't Sanballat or Geshem. The real problem wasn't the rubble, the spears or the sword. The real problem was that they forgot to remember the great and awesome Lord. That's why they became afraid. Nehemiah said, "Take your eyes off the rubble, take your eyes off the enemy and fix your eyes on God." The lesson for us is this: You can either have an awesome problem or you can have an awesome God but you cannot have both. Did you hear that? Now you can have an awesome problem and a small impotent God and, by the way, your problem will stay awesome. It won't get any smaller and it won't go away. Or you

can have an awesome God and you will have problems; they will be nowhere nearly as large as those of the unbeliever. You can have an awesome God or you can have an awesome problem—but you can't have both. One of the most encouraging things that we can do is to do what Nehemiah said, "Remember how awesome your God is, remember how great He is, and remember He is for you and He fights for you.

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" "Will death, or famine or nakedness or peril of the sword?" (Romans 8:35) Paul names the worse things that could possibly happen to anybody. "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors." More than conquerors "through Him who loved us." (Romans 8:37) You can have an awesome God or you can have an awesome problem. Nehemiah said remember you've got an awesome God. He adjusted their focus.

2. Advanced their fortifications. "Therefore, I station some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families with their swords, spears and bows." "From that day on, half of my men did the work while the other half was 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 4:13, 16)

Now, someone may have the question: "Doesn't arming the people show a lack of faith? Nehemiah has already prayed, God, take care of us. Don't let anything happen to us. Why on earth would he arm all of his people? Didn't he trust God to take care of him?" There are a lot of people who think that way. Nehemiah was showing his faith by his works, his actions.

Jesus said "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation." (Matthew 26:41) Did you hear that? Watch and pray! Paul wrote "Devote yourselves to prayer being watchful and prayerful." (Colossians 4:2) You see what is being said in those two verses? Pray—oh, absolutely. But as you pray, be on your watch for the enemy.

Peter put it this way: "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." (1 Peter 5:8) It is faith to pray to God for protection, then to put your armor on and be on guard against the devil.

In fact, to pray for protection and to leave yourself vulnerable to the enemy, that's not faith, that is foolish presumption. For example, if you pray saying, "Now, Lord, tonight I want to go a movie and, boy, it's filthy and violent, it's filled with sex and immorality and violence. I hear it's got a great plot, so God just protect me from all that other stuff." Friends, that's not a prayer God will honor. How presumptive it is for you to say, "God, I want to go dance with the enemy but You take care of me, OK?" It's just as presumptive as the father who prays, "Now, Lord, you know I need to work these 80 hours for the next many, many, many weeks. I just got to do it to bring home more bacon. But, God, you take care of my family and make sure those kids turn out right." How presumptive! Do we expect God to answer that prayer? Or you may say, "God, I know you want me to marry a Christian. I know that it is important, but, you know, there's this person and I know they don't care about you. I'll tell you what. God, you can change their heart." If you go dance with the enemy, don't you expect God to protect you. What Nehemiah said here is

absolutely right. He said we're going to pray to God, and we're going to post a guard. It's like the old saying in a revolution "Trust in God and keep the powder dry." It's exactly what God would expect us to do. He advanced their fortifications, and we need to be doing the same thing in our personal lives.

3. Advocated their future. "Don't be afraid of them. 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) Nehemiah said, "We're not just building a wall here, we're building a future." What a great statement to a discouraged people. He said for them to have a long-term perspective. What we're doing here is bigger than the moment.

4. Accentuated their fellowship. "Then I 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. Whenever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us." (Nehemiah 4:19-20) "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 4:22) You see, Nehemiah had the fellowship drawn in tighter. He said, "We're going to have a trumpeteer and whenever you hear that trumpet, everybody come together because we need to be together for safety." Then he said, "Those of you who have been living outside the wall, you come and live inside." He did that for their protection and to keep them from hearing all that awful propaganda the enemies are spreading. Nehemiah had all the people come together because he knew that fellowship is a great antidote for discouragement.

Like those Jews 2,500 years ago, all of us have trouble with rubble. I'd like to tell you that all of our problems would go away. They won't. We can hang in there together and we can build a great wall for God. "Let's encourage each other as long as it's called today." ... "And let us not forsake the assembly." (Hebrews 10:24-23) Let us be together whenever we possibly can.

Ministry is messy. Isn't that profound? Deep, isn't it? Ministry is messy. Ministry is getting out there in the name of God where things have been destroyed and where things need to be built and lives need to be repaired and families need to be put back together. You can't have ministry without rubble. It's going to always be messy. And if Heaven had been afraid of getting messy, we'd sure be in a mess, wouldn't we? Because Jesus never would have come to this earth and packaged Himself in flesh. Ministry will always be costly, make us tired, and get us discouraged. We will always need to be motivated and pumped up to do more. You can't build something great for God without getting your hands dirty.

Faithfulness means finishing. Satan's aim is to make the Christian a quitter. He just wants you to quit. He wants you to come down off the wall. "Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain." (1 Corinthians 15:58)

Are you discouraged? Have the catalysts of Satan been working on you? Have the circumstances been right for discouragement in your life? Have you allowed those internal causes to take root? You've got an awesome God, far more awesome than whatever problem you might have. Put your trust and faith in Him today.

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