

Conquering Discouragement - Nehemiah 4:6-14

by Rev. Robert Griffith

There is a plague sweeping our nation which is more pervasive than influenza or cancer or even the common cold and this plague can be as deadly as the most dreaded diseases known to man, in terms of its impact on the human race. This plague is called discouragement.

Many things are true about discouragement. At least three things, however, make it such a potent enemy. Firstly, **discouragement is universal**. Discouragement strikes everyone. None of us are immune. Everyone has been discouraged at one time or another regardless of age, race, wealth, privilege or education. Even whether you are Christian or not - everyone gets discouraged.

Secondly, **discouragement is recurring**. Being discouraged once does not give you an immunity to this disease. You can be discouraged over and over again. In fact, you can even be discouraged by the fact that you are discouraged so often. There's no antibody which can be injected to give you immunity. Discouragement comes and goes and it comes back again.

Thirdly, **discouragement is highly contagious**. Discouragement spreads by even casual contact. People can become discouraged because you are discouraged. You can become discouraged because people around you are discouraged. Like the man who was standing on a bridge about to jump to his death. A passer-by stopped his car and attempted to talk some sense into the man. He asked him why he wanted to jump. From the depths of discouragement, the man gave him a long list of all things wrong in this world and why there was really no reason to live anymore. The passer-by tried to reason with the man, saying that things weren't as bleak as they looked. For ten minutes the conversation went on, until finally *they both jumped!* Discouragement is contagious.

Now I'm a very positive person. I usually have a 'glass-half-full' view of life and I am not discouraged very easily, which is pretty amazing really because when I accepted the call of God many years ago into full time ministry, I agreed to take on a role which is a magnet to discouragement. There is always a steady stream of discouraging people or circumstances which seem to follow those in the front line of the mission of Christ. So I have had to learn how to deal with the constant threat of this disease and of course God is Who I always turn to at those times and more often than not He leads me back into the Scriptures and reminds me of the truths I have always known, but can often forget in the heat of the battle on the front line.

There are many stories and passages in the Bible which give us tools to battle discouragement and this past week I found myself once more in the book of Nehemiah as God used this ancient brother's story to remind me of the causes and cures for discouragement. So I thought I would share this with you all today, because I'm sure I'm not the only one God wants to pick up, dust off and lead back into the battle today.

Nehemiah, you may recall, was the leader of the Jews who had returned to Israel from Babylon to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. God had given him a vision to rebuild what had been torn down. They were excited initially. They began the work with great anticipation and joy. It says of them that the people had a mind to work and they worked diligently. It says about their work that they built the wall and the whole wall was joined together to half its height.

The work was going well, the people were excited, and the wall was slowly going up. Then, as is so often the case, circumstances changed and the people encountered some difficult times, and when the going got tough - the people became discouraged.

You see, where God is at work, the enemy is also at work. Rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem was certainly no exception to this. Where God is at work, Satan stirs up agitators, opponents, critics and discouragers to attempt to block the work of God. When the enemies of God's work began to come against the people of God, the result was that the people were greatly discouraged. The same thing happens to us today. Often, when the enemy comes against us, we become discouraged. It is important to know this, and to recognise it for what it is.

If we understand how discouragement comes, what the trigger points might be, then we can also understand how to deal with this discouragement in a positive way. Discouragement will come. The challenge we have is to know the signs of its coming and the actions we must take to overcome it. We need to understand both the causes and the cures for discouragement.

Let me suggest three of the biggest triggers or causes of discouragement. From my personal experience, and from walking alongside thousands of people who have become discouraged, three of the greatest causes are fatigue, frustration and fear. Let me unpack those a little for us.

1. Fatigue

Fatigue is a major cause of discouragement. After the enemies of the rebuilding of the wall had begun to cause a disturbance among the people, we begin to see fatigue setting in. In verse 10 we read that in Judah it was said, "*The strength of the burden bearers is failing . . .*" The people who had been working on the wall had been working for a long time. They were worn out and now this opposition had come which was causing their physical fatigue to become more acute. When you are physically drained, it's so easy to become discouraged by the slightest problem.

It's also interesting to notice just when these people became fatigued and discouraged. Verse 6 says that the wall was built to half its height. They were half-way through. Many times when we start a new project the first half goes quickly and well. Why? Because we are excited about accomplishing the goal. It is new and novel, but when the newness wears off and the work becomes routine and constant, then it's easy to become fatigued. And when you are tired, physically and mentally, it's easy to become discouraged and to begin to think that you will never get through this.

This is what happened to Judah. Verse 10 says: "*The strength of the burden bearers is failing . . . and we ourselves are unable to rebuild the wall.*" They were ready to give up. These are the same people who were described in verse 6 as those who had a mind to work.

You can probably think of some project you have undertaken where you have had a similar experience. It might have been some project at work, or some project around your house. About half-way through the project you began to think that you would never finish. Perhaps it was taking much longer than you thought, which is not unusual. Perhaps you began to rationalise and even develop arguments for why you shouldn't finish and why perhaps you shouldn't have even started in the first place! Maybe you even began to think that it wasn't God's will that you finish.

Many people fail to complete many things because of fatigue and the discouragement it can bring. This is especially true when things are going wrong in the process. When you knock the paint over, or break the glass, or damage the new thing you are trying to install, it can be discouraging. This is especially true when you are tired physically. Physical tiredness can quickly lead to mental fatigue and those two combined will often be a trigger point for discouragement to take over.

2. Frustration

Frustration is another reason why we become discouraged. In verse 10 we also read that the people were saying, *"There is much rubble; and we ourselves are unable to rebuild the wall."* They became discouraged because they were so frustrated with the situation.

They were talking about the rubbish that was in their way. I'm sure they were encountering old broken rocks, dirt and dried out mortar, and other debris that was underfoot and in the way and there were no bobcats or bulldozers on this job! This junk was everywhere, and it was frustrating.

Just as they lost sight of their goal, so can we lose sight of our goal when we have so much junk in our lives with which to deal. Do you have a lot of rubble that's in the way in your life? The rubbish in your life may be sinful or negative thoughts, attitudes or actions. Or the rubbish may simply be the many trivial things that can waste your time, consume your energy, and spend your money. The rubbish is anything which gets in our way, that keeps us from accomplishing the truly important goals in our lives. And the rubbish does one critical thing - it frustrates us. That's why we need to deal with the rubbish and the obstacles in our lives.

In Hebrews 12:1 we are told that we should *"lay aside every encumbrance."* Having a lot of rubbish in our lives is an encumbrance or weight. It slows us down. It trips us up. It blocks our vision. It causes us to stumble or fall and it's very frustrating. The result is that our attention and energy is focused on the rubbish and not the goal. Frustration is a prime cause of discouragement.

3. Fear

Another cause of discouragement is fear. The enemies of the Lord's work had struck fear in the hearts of God's people. Nehemiah himself saw their fear. They were afraid of the enemies and as a result felt like they could not succeed. Remember they said in verse 10 *"And we ourselves are unable to rebuild the wall."* They were ready to give up.

Fear is discouraging. Fear can be paralyzing if not deal with early. When you are fearful, how do you respond? Well, often it makes you just want to give up. This is the same feeling that these Jews had. Because of their fear, they were ready to quit. They thought they were not strong enough to finish because they could not resist the enemy. If we feel like the task is too large and the resources are too meagre, sometimes we will react the same way. If we do, however, then we will surely fail. These Jews could have quit. Had they done so, they would have surely failed, and they would not have accomplished what was clearly God's purpose for their lives. We must be careful not to let fear overcome us. When we are fearful we are most vulnerable and susceptible to discouragement.

So these are three of the main doors through which discouragement enters our lives. Fatigue, frustration, and fear. Be on your guard when you encounter them because discouragement will not be far behind. But what can we do about discouragement when it does come against us? What is the treatment for this disease? We have seen some of the causes, but what are some of the cures?

Well, of course prayer is always number one on our list. We should always turn to God and ask for the wisdom and strength and faith to resist this insidious intruder in our lives. But I think you know by now that God rarely waves a magic wand and changes everything without our involvement. Most of God's answers to our cries for help come with some guidance for what we must do, with the Lord's help, to push back and free ourselves from this debilitating disease.

I want to suggest the three main things we need to do at that point are to reorganise, remember and resist. Let me explain.

> Reorganise

One of the first things Nehemiah did was to reorganise. In verse 13 Nehemiah said, *"Then I stationed men in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, the exposed places, and I stationed the people in families with their swords, spears, and bows."*

Remember, they had already completed building half the wall. Nehemiah had already organised the people and they had accomplished half of this massive task. Now, however, a new situation had arisen. This new situation required a change in approach. So Nehemiah reorganised the people to be effective in their task. When we are discouraged, one of the things we can do is to reorganise our priorities. You can look at your life. You can adopt a change in approach instead of becoming so discouraged that you quit. If you have a problem then reorganise and approach things differently. It may not work, but, you have to try or failure is guaranteed. Just don't give up! Don't be overcome by discouragement. Do something about it! Reorganise. We also need to remember.

> Remember

In order to overcome discouragement we must remember the Lord. Listen to what Nehemiah said in verse 14: *"When I saw their fear, I rose and spoke to the nobles, the officials, and the rest of the people: 'Do not be afraid of them; remember the Lord who is great and awesome.'"*

How do you remember the Lord? What do you remember about Him? Well, you remember first that He is there! The greatest discouragement comes when you think you are all alone in a situation. But God is there! He is there whether you realise it or not, but it really helps to realise it!

Next, you remember that God is great and awesome. God's grace is always sufficient to deal with your discouragement and with any situation you face. This is something of which you must remind yourself. This is what it means to really remember the Lord.

So, when you're discouraged, you need to turn your attention away from your discouragement and circumstances to the One who is able to change your situation or change you and your response. God has been faithful to you in the past. He is faithful to you today. And He has promised to be faithful to you in the future. So remember the Lord. Remember His promises. Remember His goodness. Remember His power. Our God is an awesome God! Remember Him.

> Resist

However, you can't remain passive. You must resist and go into battle against discouragement. You must be active and fight discouragement. Notice what Nehemiah says in verse 14: *"Fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses."*

Nehemiah was saying that they should not give up, but fight. He was saying that they should not simply yield to discouragement, but that they should resist with all their might. He is calling them to action. And this is the same call we need to heed if we would win the war against discouragement. It is clear from the Scriptures that we, as believers, are in a spiritual battle. We are engaged in a kingdom conflict. Satan and his demonic spirits are committed to do everything possible to discourage and defeat us. We need to do precisely what Nehemiah encouraged the people to do. We must resist.

This is precisely what we are told to do in James 4:7. There we are told to *"Resist the devil."* We are to resist his work in our midst. We are to resist his negative thoughts. We are to resist all of the discouragement that he tries to bring into our lives.

We must fight the fight of faith and stand firm against the work of the enemy in our midst. Only in this way will we find success in our battle against discouragement.

While fatigue, frustration, and fear can bring discouragement our way, reorganising our priorities, remembering our Lord, and resisting the enemies of God and His people can bring us through discouragement every time. If we will apply these principles, God will give us the victory and our spiritual, mental and emotional immune system will grow stronger and stronger each time we battle with discouragement and win. That will make us stronger next time and more alert to the signs and more equipped to take action.

We will never be totally free from discouragement in this life, but, like Nehemiah, God will give us what we need to overcome this enemy every time! Praise be to God.