

## “The Devil’s Defensive Line of Discouragement” // Nehemiah 4 & 6// Nehemiah # 4<sup>1</sup> // Sun 9:30

Campus Reader: **4:1** Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews. 2 And he said in the presence of his brothers and of the army of Samaria, “What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore it for themselves? ...Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, and burned ones at that?” 3 Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, “Yes, what they are building—if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall!”

4 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. 5 Do not cover their guilt, and let not their sin be blotted out from your sight...

6 So we built the wall. And all the wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work.

7 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. 8 And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it. 9 And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night...

14 And I looked and arose and said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, “Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes.”

16 From that day on, half of my servants worked on construction, and half held the spears, shields, bows, and coats of mail. And the leaders stood behind the whole house of Judah... 18 And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built.”

Nehemiah 4, if you’re not already there in your Bibles.

Every work of God in the world, whether great or small, faces opposition. We learned in our study of Paul’s letters to the Corinthians that the presence of opposition doesn’t prove that God isn’t behind something; it usually proves that *he is*. Paul said (1 Cor 16:9), “A great door of ministry has been opened to me... **AND THERE ARE MANY ADVERSARIES.**” Not “Well, I thought a great door of ministry had been opened to me but then it got hard so I concluded God wasn’t in it.” But, a great door of ministry was opened to me AND there are many obstacles.

That means if you’re going to make it in the Christian life, you’re going to have to learn to press through opposition! **Get this:** In the book of Nehemiah, there are **only 2 verses** (GRAPHIC) exclusively devoted to cultivating passion and vision in ministry; there are **5 devoted to planning**; there are **10 verses devoted to prayer**. But,

<sup>1</sup> Sources consulted: Eric Mason, *Nehemiah for You*, (London, UK: The Good Book Company, 2022); Andy Stanley, *Visioneering*, (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 1999); Dr. Tony Evans, “[Nehemiah - Rebuilding a Broken Culture, Part 3](#)”, July 16, 2020, Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship; Skip Heitzig, “[How to Build when Bombs Fall](#)”,

April 27, 2005, Calvary Church; Skip Heitzig, “[Fighting the Enemy of Discouragement](#)”, May 11, 2005, Calvary Church; Craig Groeschel, “[Standing Strong in the Face of Opposition - The Good Work, Part 3](#)”, June 16, 2019, Life Church; Tim Keller, “[Laboring for a God who Fights for Us](#)”, June 28, 2014, The Gospel Coalition’s National Women’s Conference. And others as noted throughout.

there are **4 WHOLE CHAPTERS devoted to persistence** in the face of opposition. That in itself is extremely instructive for us. You see, we spend all our time on **these things**, but persistence in the face of opposition might be the most important skill to master if you're going to succeed in the life God is calling you to.

### **A lot of things in life work like that, right?**

- I mean, regardless of what you think of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's social policies, historians agree it was his unwavering and steely resolve that guided us successfully through WW2. A reporter asked FDR, before he died, how he could be so tireless in his efforts. He pointed to his bouts with polio and said, "You're looking at a man who spent 2 years trying to learn to wiggle his big toe. (If there's one thing I've learned how to do, it's not give up)."
- Or the scientist Louis Pasteur, whose discoveries in germ theory introduced one of the most meaningful scientific shifts in human history, when asked about the source of his greatness, replied simply, "My genius lies solely in my tenacity."
- Or how about this, from the sports world: **Emmitt Smith, of the Dallas Cowboys**, was, IMHBAO, was the greatest running back of all time. I say that not because I'm a Dallas Cowboys fan, which I am, but because for more than 20 years he's held the NFL record for most rushing yards. (Listen, when you say you're a Cowboys fan these days, that's not a flex--that's a plea for sympathy. You gotta be a true believer to still say that). Over his career Emmitt Smith rushed for 19,941 yards--which is more than 10 miles. But here's the thing: he got knocked down on average every 4.2 yards of those 10 miles. And, he was one of the smallest players in the NFL. He was only 5'9", 210 lbs. The average NFL lineman is 320 lbs. So, imagine running from downtown Durham to Franklin Street, which is about 10 miles, and every 4.2 yards you get violently blindsided by someone twice your size. Sound fun? What

made Emmitt Smith great was that he kept getting up and pressing forward.

- In fact, **John Madden famously explained that a running back's "YAC" (Y-A-C, which stands for "Yards After Contact")**, is his most important skill--YAC meaning the number of yards he can keep going after he's been hit. Emmitt Smith had one of the highest YAC's in football history. Commentators said he could somehow consistently turn 2-yard losses into 3-yard gains.

Your success in the Christian life is based on your YAC--what you do after contact.

So, let's just be honest and level-up here for a moment: some of you have started down a path toward something you thought God was leading you toward, but then you hit opposition.

- You started to try to follow Jesus but your spouse has really gotten difficult. They're giving you a hard time. Or maybe an old temptation resurfaced.
- Or, this weekend you decided to come to church for the first time in a long time, but your family argued literally the whole way over here and you wondered, "Is this a sign that this is just not FOR us right now?"
- Or, you made a decision to get out of debt and start tithing but then your car broke down. Have you ever had that happen? People telling these amazing stories about how God provided after they decided to tithe and you're like, "My car broke down!"
- Or, you started volunteering to serve with the children here at Summit, but then one of the children puked all over you

Everybody deals with this! The question is, **"How's your YAC?"** (BTW, could I suggest that as the new Summit greeting? "How's your YAC this week?") Nehemiah had great YAC. Let me show you all the ways Nehemiah experienced opposition and how he responded to them. I

count 5 ways he experienced opposition. If you'll let me stay with the football image, I call these:

## The Devil's Defensive Line of Discouragement

And when you get hit with these 5 things, it feels like you're getting hit by a 320 lb lineman. I know that from experience (And I worked hard to make them all start with "D," so PLEASE notice and appreciate that)

So #1...

### 1. Derision (4:1-3)

- **Vs 1:** "(Sanballat) jeered at the Jews, and he said... 'What are these feeble Jews doing?... Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, and burned ones at that?' (What are they even gonna build these walls with? All they have to work with is trash!
- Then, vs 3, Tobiah joins in, 'Yes, what they are building—if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall!'" ("Nehemiah, what are you doing? You've never built anything! You were a professional wine-taster, Nehemiah! You've never known a day of hard work in your life. You're soft. You're NERF BALL, Nehemiah."
- Some of you have faced this kind of mockery in pursuits of faith you've attempted: People telling you that you'll never succeed. That "you don't have what it takes. This is just a fad. You'll never make it. You'll just fade away like you always do."
- Social media makes this 1000x worse, btw, because now you can be gang-mocked and dog-piled by total strangers. I wonder what it would have been like if Sanballat or Tobiah had had an X account. They'd be posting pictures of Nehemiah's walls and making memes out of him. They would have savaged Nehemiah, no doubt! Something like: (PICS)

- How about this **one**: Nehemiah still sipping on the King's wine if he thinks this is gonna work 🤖 #PrayforNehemiah #RockPile
- Or, to use their **actual words**,: "When you building a wall with trash, even a fox can tear it down." (And it would have like, 869 likes and retweets)
- Some of you have been mocked in your attempts to follow Jesus. Belittled. Humiliated.

*Defensive lineman #2:*

### 2. Discreditation (4:7-8; 6:6-7)

- **Vs 7** 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. 8 And they all plotted together to come and *fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion* in it.
  - 'To fight against and cause confusion' means these guys engaged in both terrorist-type sabotage activities and they spread lies about Nehemiah's leadership to try to erode people's confidence in him as a leader.
  - This took the form not only of mockery and insult, but outright lies. Chapter 6, vs 6: "It is reported among the nations... that you and the Jews intend to rebel... and you have set yourself up as king." (6:6-7) That wasn't true; Nehemiah had never done that.
  - Have you had that happen? I have. And your first impulse is, "Well, why doesn't God defend me? Why doesn't he shut the mouth of whomever is slandering me?"
- **BTW, back in chapter 4, vs 7 shows you** their opposition came literally from all sides.
  - Sanballat was a Samaritan (Samaria was North of Jerusalem),
  - the Arabs were from the South,

- the Ashodites were from the West,
- and the Ammonites were from the East.
- Their opposition literally came from all sides.
- **Can I be really transparent with you?** I definitely don't want to make this about me or our church, but just to illustrate: One of the things that has been the most bewildering to me is when you start taking opposition from multiple directions. I'm used to being criticized from the left. I mean, that makes sense. We are Christians who believe the Bible is God's Word so of course we take it from the left. I mean, we're not so far right we can feel the edge of the flat earth or anything, but of course we take criticism from the left. What's been bewildering, however, is when we take it from the right for doing things that seem consistent with the most basic instincts of the gospel. Like trying to show compassion for people; or we attempt to at least understand their pain and enter into it.
  - Something I've had to learn: Jesus took criticism from both sides, and to be clear, I'm not saying we're one with Jesus or that we fully represent him. He was perfect, and we get a lot of stuff wrong. I'll go on record and say that a lot of criticism I get is valid--there are legitimate things I've learned from it, even when it's given in the wrong spirit. But the plain fact is that Jesus's crucifixion was a joint project between the secular left and religious right. Both right and left hated him, for different reasons. One hated him for his claims to authority and the other hated how he showed compassion to sinful people and brought social undesirables close.
- I can't see any way around the fact that if you're going to live like Jesus in the world, you're gonna take it from both sides, because the spirit of the religious Pharisees and the spirit of the pagan Romans are still mightily at work in our world.
- In fact, I'm pretty confident that if you're not taking it from both sides, you might not be as much like Jesus as you think you are,
- Again, to be clear, I'm not saying we're like Jesus, perfectly balanced, just that if you're aspiring to live like him, you should expect discreditation attempts.
- Christians in almost every era since have dealt with this.
  - Jesus was called a glutton and a frat-boy.
  - The early church was called anarchists and cannibals.
  - When John Wesley took the gospel to the streets to try and reach people, leaders in the Church of England called him an emotional fanatic and banned him from their pulpits.
  - When Richard Allen, the former slave-turned-gospel-preacher and founder of the AME denomination in America, tried to reach fellow African-Americans with the gospel, he was called a disruptor and troublemaker. He was literally pulled up off his knees while praying in a Methodist church and thrown out of the church, and all he was doing was praying for a way to reach fellow blacks with the gospel.
  - I'm not trying to put us in this company, Summit, and anything WE'VE experienced pales in comparison to what these brothers and sisters went through, but we've dealt with this kind of thing in our own way. When we've tried to reach people, people accuse us of only caring about numbers. When we've tried to lead our congregation to reflect racial makeup of the city, we've been accused of selling out to a DEI agenda. When we've made any attempt even to understand the plight of non-majority communities--people of color, refugees--critics have said we've surrendered to the woke mob. When we tried to care for immigrants and refugees in our city, we've been accused of promoting open borders, something I've never and would never endorse. There's a rumor online—I kid

you not—that George Soros helps fund our church and that I fly around on his private jet. Look it up!

- And then from the other side, when we've talked about the sinfulness of things like abortion, calling it the unlawful killing of a human life, or spoken out about the destructiveness of the LGBTQ agenda or spoken against the child abuse that masquerades right now as gender transition for kids, we've been accused of being political or bringing politics into the church--to which I always say, "We didn't bring the church into politics; you brought your politics into the realm of God's truth so we have to speak about it."
- Again, I don't want to make this all about us, because, see, I know some of you have dealt with this in your own way. Whether it's because of the stands you take, or sincere good things you've been trying to do, others have falsely accused you and mistreated you and sought to discredit you.

1. **Derision.** 2. **Discreditation.** That leads to...

### 3. Doubt (4:10)

- The thing about persistent mockery and slander is it works--at least a lot of times. People start saying, "Well, you know, where there's smoke, there's fire" and they start gossiping. People love a good scandal story. Look at **ch 4 vs 10**: 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."
  - The critical voices got in the heads of Nehemiah's people and they started to doubt: "Maybe our critics are right. Maybe Nehemiah is just a guy with a wild dream and we've given ourselves over to him. I mean, did God really speak to him? Was anybody here for that?"
- Discreditation from the outside feels brutal. But the thoughts that always stick most in MY head aren't the critiques from *out there*.

It's doubts from *in here* and other people's criticisms have a way of drawing out my own insecurities.

- You been there?
- Who do you think you are? What credentials do you bring?
- Impostor syndrome: If people saw who you really were or knew what on in that messed up head of yours, they'd never follow you.
- Listen, there are times I ask myself, "Should I even be a pastor?" I mean, 'pastor' means 'shepherd' and sometimes I feel more like a wandering sheep than a competent shepherd.

### 4. Distraction (Neh 6:2-4)

- Read these three chapters and you'll find FOUR attempts to pull Nehemiah away from the work.
- The first one happens in **Nehemiah 6:2**: "Sanballat and Geshem sent to me, saying, 'Come and let us meet together at Hakkephirim in the plain of Ono.'"
- Sanballat is like, "Hey, let's conference. Let's set aside some time and see if we can come to a compromise on this." ***And, if you just looked at this on the surface***, you might be like, "Come on, *Nehemiah--conversations can't hurt.*" But Nehemiah discerns he's dealing with a bad-faith actor.
- Look at what Nehemiah tells us at the end of vs 2: "But they intended to do me harm." Nehemiah recognizes these are not good-faith people looking for a solution; these are guys fundamentally at odds with Nehemiah and his mission. They're using feigned diplomacy as a cloak to slow down, distract, and *ultimately derail* Nehemiah's calling.
- So Nehemiah was like, "Ono? Oh, no!" **And I sent messengers to them, saying, 'I am doing a great work and I cannot come down.'**
  - Nehemiah's statement in vs 3 stands as one of the greatest leadership verses in the Bible: "I am doing a great work, and I cannot come down."

- Sometimes you have to recognize when answering your critics only serves their purposes. *“I am doing a great work and I cannot come down.”* Sometimes when I’ve heard from my critics the image I have in my head is like I’m a fireman running into a burning building because there are people trapped inside, and on the way in some by-standers, and people dressed-up like firemen are standing off over to the side calling my name, trying to draw me into some argument about the equipment I’m using or how I’m carrying my axe or the tone of voice I’m using when calling out to people in the building or whether a fireman should wear their patch on their right arm or their left arm and I say, “I don’t have time for these stupid arguments. That building is on fire. God has called me to get those people out, not to manage your opinions of me.”
- I’m always reminded of how **D.L. Moody**, the great American evangelist of the 1800s responded when someone said to him. He would hold large meetings in theatres and give altar calls and some of the local church leaders said, “Mr. Moody, we don’t like your way of doing evangelism. It’s cheap and undignified. And sometimes people who come forward in the invitation are just responding emotionally and aren’t really sincere and so you create false converts.” Moody said, ‘Yeah, there’s a lot of things in our process we can work on. But I’ll tell you one thing: I like my way of doing it better than your way of NOT doing it.’
- ***Listen, I’m not saying there’s no room for critiques.*** I read most critiques, especially when they’re offered in good faith, and like I said, I spend a lot of time listening to and learning from people who disagree with me. But I always keep in mind that Satan loves to raise up Sanballat’s and Tobiah’s to distract us.
- The point here is to recognize a distraction when your enemy puts one in your path.
  - It’s like one of my pastoral mentors always told me: “J.D., always be careful accepting an invitation from a pig to wrestle in the mud, because when you wrestle with a pig in the mud, you both get dirty, but the pig likes it.”
  - ***Sometimes YOU have to recognize when an argument or some kind of self-defense is just not leading anywhere***--when it’s just not profitable to get back and forth on Facebook and instead reach out to someone and have the discussion face to face. Because I think the percentage of people who change their mind because of a zinger comment on a Facebook post or Instagram reel hovers right around ZERO. You ever changed your mind because someone really schooled you on Twitter? God hasn’t called you to manage everyone else’s opinion of you, he’s called you to build a wall.

## 5. Deception (6:10–12)

- In chapter 6:10, Nehemiah’s enemies sink to a new low. They send in a false prophet who tells Nehemiah he’s got a word from God: **“Let us meet together in the house of God... for they are coming to kill you. They are coming to kill you by night.”**
  - This guy says, “Hey Nehemiah, God sent me to warn you about a plot and you need to leave the work immediately and go hide.”
- Vs 12, Nehemiah discerns, **“Then I understood and saw that God had not sent him.”** Christian, this is why you need to be prayed up, because you have to be able to discern what’s a true warning from God and what’s a distraction/deception from the enemy. Some of the worst counsel I’ve ever gotten in my life has been preceded by the words “God told me to tell you *this*.”
- Nehemiah has to show similar discernment in vs 17, **“Many in Judah were bound by oath to Tobiah... They spoke of his good**

**deeds in my presence.”** Now you’ve got a bunch of people on Nehemiah’s staff going, “Nehemiah, you know who we’re really impressed by lately? This guy Tobiah. He really gets us. You should put him on your steering team. He’s just a stellar fellow, I tell you.” Again, Nehemiah has to show discernment. That’s the job of the leader; it’s the job of the person pursuing the call of God. Satan is a liar, and he masquerades as an angel of light. Which means he doesn’t always present himself as temptation to sin; sometimes he shows up in your life masquerading as spiritual counsel. When he tempted Jesus in the wilderness, he used Scripture.

- Which is why you have to prayed-up and studied-up--really know your Bible--or Satan will eat you for lunch.

#### **There are 5 players in the Devil’s Defensive Line of Discouragement:**

**1. Derision; 2. Discreditation; 3. Doubt; 4. Distraction; 5. Deception.**

And they all start with “D” which proves this list was inspired by the Holy Spirit.

When you start doing anything for God, the devil’s defensive line smothers you. The question is what your YAC will be--how many “Yards (you’ll get) After Contact”?

Let me show you 3 things Nehemiah told his people to increase their YAC:

### **Nehemiah on How to Increase Your YAC**

#### **1. Remember (4:14)**

- In chapter 4 vs 14, Nehemiah says, **“Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome...”** Remember who called you--remember whose work you’re doing; remember what he’s done in the past and what he’s promised for the future.

- My primary job as a pastor, I feel like, is to help you remember. My primary job as your pastor/preacher is not to be entertaining or inventive; my primary job is reminding. I’m the REMINDER-IN-CHIEF. I remind you of who our God is and what his great works in the past were like, so that you will be inspired for the future.
- Hear this: the reason we remind ourselves of what God did in the past is to raise our expectations for what he’ll do in the future.
- Listen, it’s always tempting to relegate God’s great works as things of the past.
- I’m sure people in Nehemiah’s day said, *“Well, yeah, Nehemiah, of course God did this for Moses and Joshua but that was then, and this is now. They were escaping from slavery in Egypt; all we’re trying to do is build a wall!”* But Nehemiah said, **“No,” chapter 4 vs 20: “Our God will fight for us (today).”**
  - Listen, Summit: the wall is not finished, which means he’s still working! Jesus said, “I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.” And as long as the work is incomplete, Jesus’s power remains available to build it.
  - It’s always tempting to relegate God’s great works to the past. But the point of remembering what he did in the past is to instruct us in what he wants to do in the future.
  - There’s a fascinating passage in the book of Amos, where Amos makes this same point.
    - Amos wrote a few years before Nehemiah--and apparently people in his day had the same problem as Nehemiah--they thought God’s great works were primarily things of the past. Here’s what Amos said to them: **“This is what the Lord says to Israel: . . . ‘Do not seek Bethel, do not go to Gilgal, do not journey to Beersheba. . . . Seek the Lord and live”** (Amos 5:4–6). **(Bethel, Gilgal, and Beersheba** may sound like a random list of ancient Middle Eastern cities to you, but these were 3 significant places in Israel’s history, all of which had experienced a special outpouring of God’s power.)

- **At Bethel**, God had met with Jacob in the vision of the ladder and renewed his promise to make him a great nation. **Gilgal** was the place the children of Israel had emerged after wandering for 40 years in the wilderness, and there God renewed his covenant with Israel. From there, God parted the waters of the Jordan River and knocked down the walls of Jericho. **At Beersheba**, God had officially given Abraham possession of the Promised Land.<sup>2</sup>
- The point is each of these places represented a time when heaven moved powerfully on earth. Israel spoke reverently of these places but they assumed the things God did there were things he only did in the past.
- And so, what does God say? **“Seek the Lord (NOW) and live.”** Let me paraphrase: “I am sick of hearing you talk about my works as if they were simply a thing of the past. Stop talking about Bethel and Gilgal and Beersheba as if they were places who saw me do things in the past that I just don’t do anymore. I am not the God of the past, I am the God of the present. My name is not *I was*, my name is *I AM*. Seek me **now**—in your generation—and live.”
- I wonder if, in our day, God might say to us, “I’m tired of hearing how awesome it would have been to have been a part of the early church. I’m weary of all your talk about the courage of Martin Luther or the evangelistic success of Hudson Taylor or Billy Graham. I want to move in your generation. My name is not *I WAS*; it’s *I AM*.”
- Beloved, where do you need to be reminded that the same power of God available in the past is available to help you today? Where do you need to look for God’s miraculous power? Parents? Kids.
- Remember you serve a Savior who healed the sick and walked on water and raised the dead. He couldn’t pass by people calling out to him in faith. He stopped to help them. He’ll stop to help you.
- A good leader is a good rememberer. He or she charges you to remember God’s works in the past and to remind yourself of his promises for the future. A good leader points you to look beyond the daunting obstacles in front of you to the awesome God behind you. A good leader says, “Yes, OBSTACLE! But God gets the last word!”
- Y’all remember the **Road Runner cartoon (PIC)**? That was my favorite cartoon growing up. Basically the plot in every Road Runner episode is Wile E. Coyote does something to sabotage the Road Runner from his high speed run through the desert. And usually, halfway through the episode, you’re pretty sure Road Runner is done-for. But something always goes wrong-- Wile E Coyote pushes the wrong button or he stands in the wrong place and he ends up hoisted on his own petard. Every episode ends with Road Runner’s iconic “beep, beep,” which means despite your best laid plans, I’m still blazing toward my goal.
- I think there’s gospel instruction for us in that. Nehemiah says, “Just keep in mind who ‘beep-beeps’ at the end.” God’s call always leads through the valley of opposition, and death, and the cross, but it always ends with the “beep-beep” of resurrection. (You’ve never heard that sentence in church, I promise you.)

## **II. Redirect (4:4)**

- When Nehemiah feels a threat, he does what is instinctive to him: he prays. **Chapter 4 vs 4**, “Hear, oh our God, for we are despised. Turn back their insults on their own heads...”

<sup>2</sup> Gen 35:9–15; Josh 5:9; Gen 21:22–34

- Where is the first place you take your troubles?
- Are you the kind of person who just quits and gives up?
- Or are you the kind of person who just starts complaining and blaming everything and everyone else for why you're not succeeding? For some of us, our main thing is coming up with justifications for why things didn't work.
- Or, are you the kind of person who just takes failure in stride and assumes that if you just work harder you'll prevail?
- All those responses are wrong!
- Nehemiah's instinct is to redirect things to God in prayer. When Nehemiah's heart was burdened for something, he prayed. When he needed to develop a plan, he prayed--for 4 months! While he was waiting for an open door, he prayed. When God opened the door and Nehemiah felt the pressure to perform, he prayed. When he experienced opposition, his first instinct was... *prayer*.
- Is prayer your ***first instinct*** or your ***last resort***?
- BTW, I know some of you will wonder about the judgment overtones of Nehemiah's prayer. After Nehemiah says, "Turn back their taunt on their own heads" he goes on to say, "...and give them up to be plundered in a land where they are captives. 5 Do not cover their guilt, and let not their sin be blotted out from your sight..."
  - And you're like, "This doesn't feel like a very Jesus-y prayer? I mean, sometimes I feel like it with my enemies--but are we allowed to pray like this?" A lot of the Psalms are this way, too--David praying for vengeance on his enemies.
  - Great question. This is a pre-Jesus prayer. Nehemiah doesn't fully understand all that God is doing yet and this is one of the many evidences that the book of Nehemiah is not the ultimate fulfillment of God's plan.
  - OT scholar Derek Kidner says in these kinds of prayers we recognize legitimate cries against injustice, legitimate requests for God to take vengeance against evil. But they are no longer

appropriate for us to pray, at least in that form, because we now know Jesus was punished in our place, for our sin, so we could have forgiveness. So, we now pray for our enemies like Jesus prayed for us, that they will find forgiveness and salvation even as God exacts perfect vengeance against injustice. Listen: every act of injustice, every false word of slander uttered against you, will one day be made right! And because you know that, if you can live with that as a constant, present, assurance, you can pray that God will bring your persecutors and your haters to repentance just like he did you, because you were unworthy, just like they are, when Jesus died and forgave you.

Remember, Redirect, and lastly,

### III. Re-Arm (4:9, 17-18; 6:3)

- They didn't stop with prayer. **Vs 9** says they prayed *and* set a guard. **Vs. 14** says they prayed *and* fought. Sometimes people think that praying means you don't act. That's not true. In the Bible, prayer is not the alternative to action; it's the preamble to action. You pray for a job and then send your application out. You pray for healing and go to the doctor. Pray for your friend to get saved, and then extend an invitation to come to our Easter services.
  - **Nehemiah even took time** to clear up rumors: In Nehemiah 6:8, in response to all the rumors and lies and slander spread about him, Nehemiah says, "No such things as you say have been done, for you are inventing them out of your own mind."
  - I want to be clear: That stuff I said earlier about not getting distracted or not trying to manage everyone's opinions **DOESN'T** mean there's never a time to give clarity. Nehemiah said, "These are lies" and he demonstrated why the accusations weren't true.

- There's a time to defend your convictions and your positions against the accusations.<sup>3</sup>
- Look at ch 4 vs 18: "And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built."
  - **Each builder had building tools in one hand and his sword in the other.** Charles Spurgeon named his periodical, "The Sword and the Trowel" based on this passage (a trowel, being one of those tools that brick-layers use to smooth out the concrete). Spurgeon said that God's servant had to simultaneously build the kingdom of God with one hand (that's the trowel) and defend against lies and attacks (that's the sword).
  - Of course, do be aware, when I talk about holding a sword, I'm of course not talking about using actual violence. We fight like Jesus fought--by speaking truth, yes--always, boldly and clearly, but also by loving our enemies, and serving them, and responding with grace and empathy to them and laying our lives down for them--even as we speak truth to them.
- Nehemiah says, **6:3**, "We've got a job to do. God hasn't called us to manage everybody else's opinion of us; he's called us to build a city. At the end of the day, there's only one person whose opinion matters to me--only one person to whom I'll give an account--and it's not my critics or my fans or my friends or my family and it's certainly not the Twitter mob, it's Jesus.

**Remember, Redirect, and Re-Arm.** That's now Nehemiah encouraged his people to keep going--and it's a great list. There's something critical left out of that list, however; something Nehemiah didn't include in his list because he didn't fully understand it yet.

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<sup>3</sup> We just got done studying 2 Corinthians where Paul does a lot of that. of salvation' but instead I have to write this letter contending for the faith because there's so many people out there trying to discredit it.' In the book of Jude in the

The writer of Hebrews supplies it. In urging his congregation to press through obstacles and opposition, says, "Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted." (Hebrews 12:3)

- When my enemies look like they're winning, *consider how Jesus endured such hostility from sinners, but then how God brought resurrection to him, so that you might not grow weary or fainthearted.*
- And when it looks like God's not answering a prayer--**consider him who prayed from the cross for deliverance and it looked like God ignored him--he even at one point said, 'my God, my God, why have you forsaking me?'--but we know now he wasn't ignoring him; soon resurrection came.** Consider him... so that you may not grow weary and fainthearted in your prayers.
- You see, we have even more reason than Nehemiah to believe what he said in 4:20, that "Our God will fight for us." Because, see, Nehemiah had only a split Red Sea and some knocked down walls in Jericho to inspire him; we have an empty tomb left by a God who voluntarily suffered death and hell in our place. And see, we know, if he did that for us there, he'll help us out in these battles now. We "consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that we may not grow weary or fainthearted" in our own pursuits.

## VAMP

They say in Egypt that only 2 creatures can scale the pyramid: the eagle and the snail. You may not have the strength of the eagle, but

NT, Jude actually says 'I wanted to write to you this happy, feel-good letter about the glories of salvation' but instead I have to write this letter contending for the faith because there's so many people out there trying to discredit it.' (Jude 3, my paraphrase)

you can have the persistence of the snail--and you can have it because of the faithfulness of Jesus. Don't give up.

Let me close by reminding you what Nehemiah reminded his people of: the lives of people we love literally hang on us pressing on through the opposition. In chapter 4 vs 14, he said, "Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes."

When Israel was first reconstituted as a nation in the 1940's, after the horrors of the Holocaust, they formed their first army. There was an induction ceremony I was told they took all the new soldiers through. Their final test for becoming soldiers was a several day, brutal, miles and miles long trek through the mountains of Judea. It involved extreme climbing and days of struggle and starvation--in some parts you had to crawl on your belly through obstacle courses. But, if you made it through, at the very top, your families and close friends were waiting there to stand with you as you were sworn into the army. The symbolism was clear, "All this pain you're going through; all this sacrifice--not giving up even when everything in you wants to--you're pressing on for the sake of your friends and family!

Yes, we're doing all this for Jesus, but we're also doing all this for people we love, people we want to see come to Jesus.. It's not an exaggeration to say that someone's life; someone's literal eternity, hinges on whether you are faithful now. So dad, who's just started to come back to church: *Don't give up*. I know it's hard, and I know there are so many obstacles. But press on, it's worth it. And those of you who are pursuing that ministry dream--don't give up, press on. The lives of lots of people you are going to bless through that ministry are WORTH IT.

I want to open this up for a time of prayer because I sense that some of you came in here feeling like you were ready to give up, and I want you to remember God's faithfulness and then come redirect, and re-arm. Or maybe you're tempted to give up on a prodigal son or daughter, or a friend, or a spouse, or a dream God's put in your heart... whatever. Do what Nehemiah did: remember, redirect, and re-arm. The first step is to come and pray. Or come pray for an enemy!

Stand, and come now, and our worship leaders will come and lead us in... "*Yet not I but Christ in me.*" Even before they start singing, you come and pray. Prayer team members and elders will be off to the sides if you need them.