

BUILD-A-BELIEVER WORKSHOPS

Ezra Nehemiah Esther

People say to me, "How do you build a church?" You don't build a church, you build a believer. As a result, the church will build itself. (John MacArthur).

Text

Nehemiah 4:1-23

Topic

Nehemiah organizes the wall-builders into a specialized tactical response team to combat their enemies

Title

Rubble-rousers

Nehemiah 4:1 But it so happened, when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, that he was furious and very indignant, and mocked the Jews.

Nehemiah 4:2 And he spoke before his brethren and the army of Samaria, and said, "What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they fortify themselves? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they complete it in a day? Will they revive the stones from the heaps of rubbish - stones that are burned?"

Nehemiah 4:3 Now Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, "Whatever they build, if even a fox goes up *on it*, he will break down their stone wall."

Nehemiah 4:4 Hear, O our God, for we are despised; turn their reproach on their own heads, and give them as plunder to a land of captivity!

Nehemiah 4:5 Do not cover their iniquity, and do not let their sin be blotted out from before You; for they have provoked *You* to anger before the builders.

Nehemiah 4:6 So we built the wall, and the entire wall was joined together up to half its *height*, for the people had a mind to work.

Nehemiah 4:7 Now it happened, when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites heard that the walls of Jerusalem were being restored and the gaps were beginning to be closed, that they became very angry,

Nehemiah 4:8 and all of them conspired together to come *and* attack Jerusalem and create confusion.

Nehemiah 4:9 Nevertheless we made our prayer to our God, and because of them we set a watch against them day and night.

Nehemiah 4:10 Then Judah said, "The strength of the laborers is failing, and *there is* so much rubbish that we are not able to build the wall."

Nehemiah 4:11 And our adversaries said, "They will neither know nor see anything, till we come into their midst and kill them and cause the work to cease."

Nehemiah 4:12 So it was, when the Jews who dwelt near them came, that they told us ten times, "From whatever place you turn, *they will be upon us.*"

Nehemiah 4:13 Therefore I positioned *men* behind the lower parts of the wall, at the openings; and I set the people according to their families, with their swords, their spears, and their bows.

Nehemiah 4:14 And I looked, and arose and said to the nobles, to the leaders, and to the rest of the people, "Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, great and awesome, and fight for your brethren, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses."

Nehemiah 4:15 And it happened, when our enemies heard that it was known to us, and *that* God had brought their plot to nothing, that all of us returned to the wall, everyone to his work.

Nehemiah 4:16 So it was, from that time on, *that* half of my servants worked at construction, while the other half held the spears, the shields, the bows, and *wore* armor; and the leaders *were* behind all the house of Judah.

Nehemiah 4:17 Those who built on the wall, and those who carried burdens, loaded themselves so that with one hand they worked at construction, and with the other held a weapon.

Nehemiah 4:18 Every one of the builders had his sword girded at his side as he built. And the one who sounded the trumpet *was* beside me.

Nehemiah 4:19 Then I said to the nobles, the rulers, and the rest of the people, "The work *is* great and extensive, and we are separated far from one another on the wall.

Nehemiah 4:20 Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us."

Nehemiah 4:21 So we labored in the work, and half of *the men* held the spears from daybreak until the stars appeared.

Nehemiah 4:22 At the same time I also said to the people, "Let each man and his servant stay at night in Jerusalem, that they may be our guard by night and a working party by day."

Nehemiah 4:23 So neither I, my brethren, my servants, nor the men of the guard who followed me took off our clothes, *except* that everyone took them off for washing.

Introduction

You military and paramilitary people immediately recognize and respect Nehemiah's skill at planning and executing special tactics in defense of the ongoing work of repairing and rebuilding the wall around the city of Jerusalem.

When we first met Nehemiah, he was the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes of Persia. He wasn't a military man; he wasn't even a retired military man. He was a butler.

Nehemiah went from *buttl*ing to *battl*ing. **You** are also a *butler* called to *battle*:

1. A butler is a type of servant. If you are a Christian, you are a servant of Jesus Christ. Wherever He has placed you – that is your place to serve Him. You are His butler as you go about your specific daily business.
2. You are very much involved in a battle. The New Testament frequently reminds you that Christians are soldiers in a battle against serious and sinister forces.

God enabled Nehemiah and the builders to meet the task of repairing and rebuilding the wall. God wants to enable us, as a congregation, to meet the task of building His Church. Anything we might glean from God's dealings with Nehemiah will help us in our own task.

We'll organize our thoughts around two points: #1 Your Tactical Unity Will Be Attained Through Prayer, and #2 Your Tactical Unity Will Be Maintained Through Perseverance.

#1 Your Tactical Unity Will Be
Attained Through Prayer
(v1-6)

Our text describes a diverse group of people, all relatively unskilled for the task, nevertheless working together to accomplish something wonderful.

It describes us! We need to think of ourselves in a plural sense – as a Church comprised of a diverse group of people, all relatively unskilled, nevertheless working together to accomplish something wonderful.

While working, we will also be warring. Hopefully not with each other – but against enemies, both from without and from within. To be spiritually successful we must therefore attain a tactical unity through prayer.

[Nehemiah 4:1](#) But it so happened, when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, that he was furious and very indignant, and mocked the Jews.

Nehemiah 4:2 And he spoke before his brethren and the army of Samaria, and said, "What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they fortify themselves? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they complete it in a day? Will they revive the stones from the heaps of rubbish - stones that are burned?"

Nehemiah 4:3 Now Tobiah the Ammonite *was* beside him, and he said, "Whatever they build, if even a fox goes up *on it*, he will break down their stone wall."

We met Sanballat and Tobiah back in the beginning of the book. They represent any and all the forces we might face from without.

Their strategy was to mock and ridicule the Jews. You will always face mocking and ridicule as a believer in Jesus Christ.

You are mocked everyday. For example: School just started. How many of your kids, especially at the college level, are being mocked for their beliefs? How many are being ridiculed when they bring-up the Bible in their answers? *And that's just in the Christian schools!*

Yet all the while we have the only hope for mankind generally, and men and women individually. They can be regenerated by God; they can be born-again and saved for all eternity.

I especially like the mention of **rubbish** in these verses. Sanballat asked, *Will they revive the stones from the heaps of rubbish...?*

- being changed to bring change -

Yes, they would! And so will we – if we trust in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the power of God to salvation. It's the only thing that takes the rubbish of human existence and revives it, giving it life – abundant and eternal life.

It seems as though Sanballat and Tobiah were speaking to a small assembly of their own soldiers and citizens, but within earshot of Nehemiah and some of the wall-builders. How would Nehemiah respond? *He prayed!*

Nehemiah 4:4 Hear, O our God, for we are despised; turn their reproach on their own heads, and give them as plunder to a land of captivity!

Nehemiah 4:5 Do not cover their iniquity, and do not let their sin be blotted out from before You; for they have provoked *You* to anger before the builders.

Maybe people would pray more if they could pray like this! Why did Nehemiah pray so boldly? Why don't we? Note two things:

1. First – Though he prayed for these things to come upon his enemies, he trusted God to do it in His good time. He did not take the matter of vengeance into his own hands.
2. Second (and more importantly) – Nehemiah was living under what we call the Abrahamic Covenant – a fancy title for the promises God made to Abraham and his descendants. In it, God said He would curse those who were against the Jews. Nehemiah was simply praying according to Scripture.

So should we pray according to Scripture – but we are not under the Abrahamic Covenant. Our prayers are to follow the model of the Lord's Prayer.

The point for us is this: When attacked, Nehemiah prayed. Through prayer, he attained a tactical unity with the wall-builders. They drew together as one:

[Nehemiah 4:6](#) So we built the wall, and the entire wall was joined together up to half its *height*, for the people had a mind to work.

Prayer obliterated the mocking ridicule of Sanballat and Tobiah. It's hard to be affected by the mean words of small men when you are talking to the Almighty God and listening for His response through His Word. In their case, they already had God's Word to repair and rebuild the wall. Prayer refocused them on the Word of God, rather than on the words of men.

Nehemiah prayed. In fact, though I'm sure that the wall-builders also prayed, it's not recorded that they did. Only Nehemiah's prayer is recorded.

Nehemiah represents the leadership. Our leadership must pray and have prayer as first priority. Pray for us that we do!

#2 Your Tactical Unity Will Be
Maintained Through Perseverance
(v7-23)

Sanballat and Tobiah were unable to openly attack the Jews because King Artaxerxes had given Nehemiah permission to rebuild the wall. But they would not relent in their opposition:

Nehemiah 4:7 Now it happened, when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites heard that the walls of Jerusalem were being restored and the gaps were beginning to be closed, that they became very angry,

Nehemiah 4:8 and all of them conspired together to come *and* attack Jerusalem and create confusion.

Sanballat and Tobiah enlisted the aid of other enemies of the Jews and began a terrorist campaign against them. They surrounded them on all their borders; they threatened the workers from outlying areas; they terrorized the woman left at home.

Nehemiah used his favorite weapon against them:

Nehemiah 4:9 Nevertheless we made our prayer to our God, and because of them we set a watch against them day and night

This is the first mention of corporate prayer. And there was something else. It was prayer... plus something else. They set a watch. It was prayer plus precaution; prayer plus preparation.

For us, it's usually precaution, preparation... Then, finally, prayer! Let's pray first, *then* let God lead us in our other actions and reactions.

They Jews next faced their most significant foe: **Themselves!**

Nehemiah 4:10 Then Judah said, "The strength of the laborers is failing, and *there is* so much rubbish that we are not able to build the wall."

Nehemiah 4:11 And our adversaries said, "They will neither know nor see anything, till we come into their midst and kill them and cause the work to cease."

Nehemiah 4:12 So it was, when the Jews who dwelt near them came, that they told us ten times, "From whatever place you turn, *they will be* upon us."

You see the terrorist threats in verses eleven and twelve. But now there was something far worse: Discouragement. And it was the worst kind of discouragement because it was accompanied by physical fatigue.

I have found discouragement to be the most potent enemy we face when doing the Lord's work. It is subtle, but sinister. Because it resides within us, we often do not even recognize it until it's seemingly too late. As we think, so we are; and if we think discouraging thoughts long enough, they will become our reality.

Disclaimer: I am speaking of spiritual discouragement. I'm talking about growing weary in our serving the Lord. I'm not talking about people with real and diagnosable chemical or organic brain problems. I am quick to add, however, that most Christians who think they have some sort of genetic predisposition to discouragement, or an unknowable chemical imbalance, are really suffering from spiritual discouragement that is 'treated' by spiritual discipline rather than a chemical regimen.

How do we defeat spiritual discouragement? Modern efforts to defeat discouragement label it as "burn-out" and seek to defeat it by withdrawal and rest, plus medication.

Well, that just wouldn't work for the Jews, now would it? Withdrawal from the work would leave them all the more vulnerable to attack. Even if they had modern meds, the bottles would warn them that they'd become drowsy, perhaps have suicidal thoughts, and to not work with tools. None of that would work. They had no real choice but to finish what they'd started.

Therein is the biblical method to defeat spiritual discouragement. Finish the work. Persevere through, and despite, the discouragement. It's what Nehemiah was led to do:

Nehemiah 4:13 Therefore I positioned *men* behind the lower parts of the wall, at the openings; and I set the people according to their families, with their swords, their spears, and their bows.

Nehemiah 4:14 And I looked, and arose and said to the nobles, to the leaders, and to the rest of the people, "Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, great and awesome, and fight for your brethren, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses."

Nehemiah 4:15 And it happened, when our enemies heard that it was known to us, and *that* God had brought their plot to nothing, that all of us returned to the wall, everyone to his work.

Instead of quitting; or going on a retreat; or a sabbatical; Nehemiah increased their work! Not only would they continue to build; they would also be ready to fight.

The most important part of his tactic was to get their eyes off of themselves and onto the Lord. They might seem overwhelmed... But they served the omnipotent God.

The remaining verses describe a few of Nehemiah's specific tactics. I want to relate them to us as a fellowship.

The first tactic was to enlist everyone as a soldier:

Nehemiah 4:16 So it was, from that time on, *that* half of my servants worked at construction, while the other half held the spears, the shields, the bows, and *wore* armor; and the leaders *were* behind all the house of Judah.

Nehemiah 4:17 Those who built on the wall, and those who carried burdens, loaded themselves so that with one hand they worked at construction, and with the other held a weapon.

Nehemiah 4:18 Every one of the builders had his sword girded at his side as he built. And the one who sounded the trumpet was beside me.

If you attend this Church; if this is your home Church; you are a soldier in a warfare. We count on you just like the Jews repairing and rebuilding the wall counted on one another. Your part in the battle may be as simple as to be here when you are supposed to; but it is no less critical to the overall tactical unity.

Nehemiah's second tactic was to establish an alarm system:

Nehemiah 4:19 Then I said to the nobles, the rulers, and the rest of the people, "The work *is* great and extensive, and we are separated far from one another on the wall.

Nehemiah 4:20 Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us."

Do we have an alarm system? (I don't mean on the buildings – which we do!). I think we need to increase our communication. We have a lot of avenues of communication in place; I'm not sure everyone is utilizing them.

Nehemiah's third tactic was to expect commitment:

Nehemiah 4:21 So we labored in the work, and half of *the men* held the spears from daybreak until the stars appeared.

Nehemiah 4:22 At the same time I also said to the people, "Let each man and his servant stay at night in Jerusalem, that they may be our guard by night and a working party by day."

At just the time the people were the most discouraged and apt to quit, Nehemiah expected them to continue and to do even more than before. The solution to spiritual fatigue is not rest; **it is more work.**

Nehemiah's fourth tactic was to set an example:

Nehemiah 4:23 So neither I, my brethren, my servants, nor the men of the guard who followed me took off our clothes, *except* that everyone took them off for washing.

Nehemiah and his closest servants set an example. The equivalent would be our Church leadership. So we've decided to not change our clothes until the Rapture!

The idea is that, though a leader might need to change his clothes, to sleep, or to rest; he is ready at a moment's notice to serve God and God's people. He has a phone number that's listed; he answers his phone in the middle of the night; he's on-call, as it were. If you're not wanting to be disturbed in those ways, that's fine; but you're not called to lead.

- being changed to bring change -

Perseverance is the word that best summarizes this section. You **can't** quit! It only makes it worse. Worse for you; worse for your brothers and sisters.

Conclusion

Until the Lord comes, construction of His church on earth will continue and there will always be gaps in the wall. Places where the enemy can come in and wreak havoc in people's lives.

We need to attain a tactical unity; we need to maintain a tactical unity. Pray; persevere.

Revelation 3:10 **Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will**

keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.

Revelation 3:11 Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown.

Revelation 3:12 He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And *I will write on him My new name.*

