

BUILD MY LIFE

"HITTING A WALL—BUILDING"

NEHEMIAH 4:1-23

When the going gets tough, the tough get going—so true it's trite. Take Nehemiah, for example. Clearing the rubble and rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem out of very large, rough-cut stones without the help of heavy equipment was tough. So tough that his coworkers sang a little song while they worked. It went like this:

"The strength of the burden bearer is drooping,
The rubbish heap so vast;
And we are unable by ourselves
To rebuild the wall."

Still, they kept on working. And when threatened on all sides, they continued to work with one hand, holding a spear in the other. This they did daily from dawn to dark, and it paid off in the end. They finished their herculean task in fifty-two days (Ne 6:15).

This Week's Core Competency

Single-mindedness – I focus on God and his priorities for my life.

Nehemiah and his coworkers are prime examples of single-mindedness. They set out to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and repair its gates. It was no small task. Ten burned gates needed to be restored, and two, perhaps two and a half, miles of city wall needed to be rebuilt. Now, these walls were not made of small clay bricks that could be passed by hand from one worker to the next. No, these walls

*From al the deceytes of the worlde,
the fleshe, and the devil: Good lorde
deliver us.*

– Book of Common Prayer 1549

were made of large, heavy rough-cut stones that had to be fitted together and piled up. (Google "images of Nehemiah's wall.") What's more, the workers faced dangerous opponents, enemies who broadcast their threats far and wide. About the Jews and within earshot of others, they boasted, "Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work" (Ne 4:11). As a result, and probably as their enemies intended, those who overheard them warned Nehemiah repeatedly, "Wherever you turn, they will attack us" (v. 12). But Nehemiah and the Jews would not be intimidated, neither by the magnitude of the task nor the looming danger they faced.

Certain New Covenant tasks today are as daunting as building the wall, some even more so, and require the same single-mindedness to finish. Consider this extraordinary example. There are people in the world that do not have access to the scriptures in their own language. In some cases, their spoken language has no written counterpart, which means that someone has to capture and express its consonant and vowel sounds along with any accompanying intonation in written form. People must be given a writing system for their spoken language before Bible translation is possible. Kent Rasmussen, a global partner, who has worked with Wycliffe Bible Translators since 2001, does that! On the nuts and bolts of the process, he writes: "Once the consonants and vowels are sketched out, we need to understand tone, word breaks, and other issues necessary to read and write well. The goal is a writing system that is easy to read and embraced by the community, so that one day the translated

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Scriptures will be too. This can take a lot of time, so this work is a process" (see www.atoznback.org).

In a more ordinary way, following the dictates of one's Christian faith and living a missional life are daunting tasks, requiring the same single-mindedness as committing a spoken language to writing. Living with integrity isn't easy in a crooked world; living on mission isn't easy in a distracting world. And, of course, there are the three ubiquitous enemies: the world, the flesh, and the devil.

day 1 ENCOUNTER – read God's word to put yourself in touch with him.

Nehemiah 4:1-23

1 When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews, 2 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 those heaps of rubble-burned as they are?"

3 Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, "What they are building—even a fox climbing up on it would break down their wall of stones!"

4 Hear us, our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. 5 Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders.

6 So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart.

7 But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the people of Ashdod heard that the repairs to Jerusalem's walls had gone ahead and that the gaps were being closed, they were very angry. 8 They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. 9 But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.

10 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."

11 Also our enemies said, "Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work."

12 Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, "Wherever you turn, they will attack us."

13 Therefore I stationed 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. 14 After I looked 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, and fight for your families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes."

15 When our enemies heard that we were aware of their plot and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to our own work.

16 From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armor. The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah 17 who were building the wall. Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other, 18 and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked. But the man who sounded the trumpet stayed with me.

19 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. 20 Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!"

21 So we continued the work with half the men holding spears, from the first light of dawn till the stars came out. 22 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 as workers by day." 23 Neither I nor my brothers nor my men nor the guards with me took off our clothes; each had his weapon, even when he went for water.

EXAMINE – what the passage says before you decide what it means.

- * Underline "angry" and "greatly incensed" in v. 1 and "very angry" in v. 7.
- * Number the rhetorical questions Sanballat asked in v. 2.
- * Circle "a fox" in v. 3.
- * Highlight vv. 4-5.
- * Number the enemies in v. 7.
- * Box "but" indicating *contrast* in v. 9.
- * Bracket the enemies' plot and its frustration in vv. 11, 15.
- * Box "therefore" indicating *result* in v. 13.
- * Bracket "took off our clothes" in v. 23.

day 2 EXPLORE – the answer to these questions to better understand what the passage means.

Consult the explanation of the message and the notes to follow if you need help.

1. Describe the initial *form* of the opposition to the rebuilding of the walls.

2. Transform Sanballat's *rhetorical* questions beginning "will they" and "can they" into declarative statements. (For example, Can Rome be built in a day? = Rome can't be built in a day.)

3. Nehemiah's prayer (vv. 4-5) sounds very un-Jesus like (cf., Mt 5:44). How would you square him with Jesus?

4. Weary workers sang a little ditty while they worked. Locate its lyrics in verse 10.

5. Once the wall was rebuilt to "half its height," Nehemiah's enemies changed their *strategy* (v. 11). How so?

6. Weren't they just *bluffing* (cf., v. 12)—what do you think and why?

7. Explain the *relationship* of verse 13 to the previous verses.

8. When did Nehemiah's enemies *abandon* their strategy to stop the building?

9. The work continued but *guardedly*. How so?

10. **Discussion:** Talk about opposition to the work of God today and following Nehemiah's pattern for responding to it.

day 3 **EXAMINE** – an explanation of the message to better understand the meaning of the passage.

Nehemiah 4:1-23 describes the rebuilding of the city wall in the face of growing opposition on every side. The chapter can be divided into three parts based on a pattern that first appears in chapter 2. (The discussion about the structure of chapter 4 is complicated by the fact that 4:1-23 in the English Bible is 3:33-4:17 in the Hebrew Bible.) One commentator explains: "In chap. 2 a literary pattern was observed whereby each major step forward in the narrative was marked by a reference to the opposition of Sanballat and his colleagues. That this was intentional was considered probable on the basis of the identical formulae at the start of 2:10 and 19" (H. G. M. Williamson, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 16, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 215). That pattern reappears in chapter 4. The same commentator writes: "A step forward in the narrative, 3:38 (4:6), is met by opposition, introduced by the formula 'When Sanballat . . . heard.' Nehemiah's countermeasures then follow. In a variation on this same basic pattern, 4:9 (15) repeats the formula ('When our enemies heard that all was known to us . . .') as an indication that this form of frontal opposition had finally failed; Nehemiah and his people are now able to continue the work unhindered-albeit with necessary precautions" (224). Following this pattern, chapter 4 is divided into three parts: vv. 1-6, vv. 7-14, and vv. 15-23.

In part one, Sanballat receives word that construction is well underway, and the Jews are making progress on rebuilding the city's walls. What he hears makes him hot, angry enough to rhetorically ask, "What are those pathetic Jews doing?" and then to engage in his own brand of

psychological warfare. Intended as ridicule, he asks a series of four rhetorical questions. The meaning of the first is "the Jews will never restore their wall," the second is "they will never offer sacrifices," the third is "they will never finish," and the fourth is "they cannot bring the stones back to life." Tobiah follows by echoing and exaggerating Sanballat's first point. The wall, he claims, is so weak that even a light-footed fox atop it would topple it. But Nehemiah is not swayed by Sanballat's tactics. In prayer, he turns his enemies over to the LORD, who says, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay" (Dt 32:35). Ridicule is wasted on the determined.

In part two, Sanballat and his henchmen take their opposition to the next level. Insults turn into threats of reprisal. Enemies on every side make plans to fight against Jerusalem. But the Jews pray, and Nehemiah posts a guard night and day to address the threat. To make matters worse, the workers are exhausted and discouraged to the point of giving out and giving up. Their enormous task is exacerbated by the piles of rubble underfoot. Then Sanballat steps it up a notch. He makes it known that he and his co-conspirators are preparing for a surprise attack on the builders—in his words, "Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work" (v. 11). Apparently, he is spreading rumors to dishearten the people. Was this an idle threat? Perhaps it was, seeing that the king had authorized the rebuilding; nevertheless, it had to be taken seriously. Therefore, Nehemiah arms his workers and posts them at openings in the wall, but he doesn't stop there. He also

encourages them—calling them together has the effect of showing their strength—telling them to remember their great and awesome LORD, and he motivates them, telling them to fight for their families (v. 14). Once their enemies know that they know about the plot, the surprise attack is frustrated.

In part three, Nehemiah and his workers get back to work on the walls, but now they work with one hand and carry a weapon in the other. Those who carried materials could carry a weapon in one hand, but those who were

building needed both hands free, so they carried a sword at their side. The workers work tirelessly from dawn to dark, Nehemiah being no exception. In the words of one commentator: "Whether awake or asleep, Nehemiah and his immediate entourage set an example of constant vigilance. With a weapon to hand and dressed at all time for action, they could not be accused of laying harder burdens on others than they themselves were willing to shoulder" (Williamson, 229).

day **4** **EMBRACE** – how God spoke to you in his word.

The Message of the Passage

Once you put your hand to the plow in pursuit of the vision God has given you, never look back regardless of the opposition you will inevitably face.

Our desire is to not be merely hearers of the word, but doers of the word as James teaches in James 1:22.

Describe a "wall-building" experience of your own.

Describe the kind of opposition you faced in pursuit of your goal.

If you had it to do over again, explain what you would do differently in light of this passage.

notes **N** STUDY – the commentaries to answer the questions.

v. 1 **angry** Translates a Hebrew word meaning "to be hot" as in "his nose became hot," that is "his anger broke out" (see Edwin M. Yamauchi, "Ezra and Nehemiah," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, rev. ed. 489). "Sanballat's reaction to this development is more severe than at the end of chap. 2. There, it looks as though the ridicule is from a position of contemptuous superiority and confidence that Nehemiah's plans are a mere pipedream. Here, by contrast, the emphasis on his extreme anger indicates the state of desperation on his part that Nehemiah may, after all, succeed. Moreover, as the next verse shows, his scorn is voiced, not merely in the hearing of the wall-builders, but in the presence of his allies; it is his way of boosting morale among his own people now that he sees that the threat is taking on serious proportions" (Williamson, 216).

v. 2 **stones . . .** Fire causes limestone to crack and disintegrate making it useless for wall-building. But not all of the stones were damaged. The wall was not made of clay bricks.

v. 3 **a fox** In some contexts the Hebrew word refers to a "jackal," but they usually run in packs. Here the reference is to a "fox," normally a nocturnal, solitary animal. "The point of the sneer is that any wall the Jews built would be so flimsy that even the light footsteps of a solitary fox would collapse it" (Williamson, 490).

v. 4 **Hear us . . .** "Nehemiah's prayer has much in common with imprecation in the Psalms and in Jeremiah (11:18-20; 15:15; 17:18; 18:19-23). Such requests seem at odds with the teaching of Christ on loving our enemies. A number of points in response to this issue should be made: (1) Nehemiah's request, like imprecations elsewhere, was for divine judgment against sin, a clear teaching in Scripture. The prayer in v. 5 for God not to cover their enemies' guilt was not a prayer against their salvation but for divine justice. (2) It was a prayer for God to act, not for permission to take personal vengeance (cf. Rom 12:19-21). (3) It expressed zeal for God's work and God's honor. Nehemiah had no doubts that the building of the wall was God's doing, so opposition to it was opposition to God. (4) It may have had a rhetorical function to encourage confidence before opposition. D. Kidner explains that in the Old Testament imprecations, 'horror may be piled on horror more to express the speaker's sense of outrage than to spell out the penalties he literally intends'" (Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, NAC, 194-95).

v. 7 **Ashdod** "A new group, the Ashdodites, now joins the alliance of the north (Sanballat of Samaria), the east (Tobiah and the Ammonites) and the south (the Arabs), to bring a threat from the west as well . . . How much of this was mere sabre-rattling it is hard to be sure (see further on verses 11f.). The failure of this impressive group to strike a single blow suggests that 'the king's letters' (2:9) gave them pause. But their plotting, however half-hearted, clearly included potential raids and harassments (8), and had to be taken seriously" (Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, TOTC, 99). Nehemiah was vexed on all sides by his enemies.

v. 10 **said** "The people's saying is in poetic form in the Hebrew text, which Myers attempts to reproduce:

The strength of the burden bearer is drooping,
The rubbish heap so vast;
And we are unable by ourselves
To rebuild the wall.

We can imagine the people singing this lament as they worked on the wall. In addition to building, they had to remove mounds of rubbish from the old destruction" (Breneman, 197).

v. 12 **ten times over** A figure of speech meaning "time and time again," "repeatedly," or just "many times."

v. 20 **trumpet** I.e., a ram's horn or shofar used for signaling in times of conflict (Jos 6:4, 6, 8, 13). "The MT and Vulgate suggest that a single trumpeter accompanied Nehemiah; but the LXX and Peshitta, reading 'next to him' (i.e., the builder), suggest a system of alarms. Josephus (*Ant.* 11.177 [5.8]) claims that Nehemiah stationed trumpeters at intervals of five hundred feet" (Yamauchi, 493; see Breneman, 199).

Family Talk

Encouragement from one parent's heart to another

John 16:33: "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." No doubt about it, when you begin to take steps toward Christ things are going to happen: obstacles, distractions, intervention, and, as promised, trouble. We want following Christ to be a rose garden, but He doesn't design it like that. Sometimes I think to myself, "Why, Lord? I'm doing what you asked." If Christ called us into a rose garden, our need for Him would be minimal. He allows us to experience challenges because He wants us to rely on Him, to trust He has our good and His glory in mind. The obstacles He allows direct us, protect us and pull us into a deeper relationship with Him as our Savior. Explaining this to kids can be challenging. Help your kids understand by assuring them God is always with us (Matthew 28:20). Encourage your kids that He has a plan (Jeremiah 29:11) and tell them a story of a hard time in your life that God saw you through. Kids love hearing stories about when you were a kid or teenager and they appreciate authenticity! Above all, model this through praying scripture with them. My favorite is Psalm 121:1-2. Encourage them to begin their own prayer time. Adversity will happen, but Jesus is victorious! We are praying the peace of Christ for your family this week!

What Does The Bible Say

Weekly Verse: Read Nehemiah 4

1. What did Sanballat and Tobiah do when they heard the Judeans were rebuilding the wall?
2. What did Nehemiah and the Judeans do in response? (vs. 4-5)
3. What was the plan to keep on building?.

What Do You Think

Can you think of another story in the Bible where God helped His people win in a battle?
Draw a picture of that story.

What R U Going To Do

The Judeans worked with one hand and held a sword of protection with another. This week do your chores one-handed.

Core Comp

Single-mindedness - I pay attention to what God thinks is important for my life.

Memory Verse

Psalm 105:1 – *Give thanks to the Lord, call on His name; make known among the nations what He has done.*

KIDPIX COUPON

I memorized my verse _____, completed *Scrolls* _____, brought Bible _____, brought a friend _____.

Series Discipleship Challenge located in KidPix Store.

Child's name _____ Grade ____ Parent's signature _____

Earn 1 token by completing the PantegoKids Bible study and another token by reciting the memory verse.

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30 CORE COMPETENCIES

10 CORE BELIEFS

Trinity *2 Corinthians 13:14*

I believe the God of the Bible is the only true God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Salvation By Grace *Ephesians 2:8-9*

I believe a person comes into a right relationship with God by His grace, through faith in Jesus Christ.

Authority of the Bible *2 Timothy 3:16-17*

I believe the Bible is the Word of God and has the right to command my belief and action.

Personal God *Psalms 121:1-2*

I believe God is involved in and cares about my daily life.

Identity in Christ *John 1:12*

I believe I am significant because of my position as a child of God.

Church *Ephesians 4:15-16*

I believe the church is God's primary way to accomplish His purposes on earth today.

Humanity *John 3:16*

I believe all people are loved by God and need Jesus Christ as their Savior.

Compassion *Psalms 82:3-4*

I believe God calls all Christians to show compassion to those in need.

Eternity *John 14:1-4*

I believe there is a heaven and a hell and that Jesus Christ is returning to judge the earth and to establish His eternal kingdom.

Stewardship *1 Timothy 6:17-19*

I believe that everything I am or own belongs to God.

10 CORE PRACTICES

Worship *Psalms 95:1-7*

I worship God for who He is and what He has done for me.

Prayer *Psalms 66:16-20*

I pray to God to know Him, to lay my request before Him and to find direction for my daily life.

Bible Study *Hebrews 4:12*

I read the Bible to know God, the truth, and to find direction for my daily life.

Single-mindedness *Matthew 6:33*

I focus on God and His priorities for my life.

Spiritual Gifts *Romans 12:4-6*

I know and use my spiritual gifts to accomplish God's purposes.

Biblical Community *Acts 2:44-47*

I fellowship with other Christians to accomplish God's purposes in my life, others' lives, and in the world.

Giving Away My Time *Colossians 3:17*

I give away my time to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Money

2 Corinthians 8:7

I give away my money to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Faith *Ephesians*

6:19-20

I give away my faith to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Life *Romans 12:1*

I give away my life to fulfill God's purposes.

10 CORE VIRTUES

Joy *John 15:11*

I have inner contentment and purpose in spite of my circumstances.

Peace *Philippians 4:6-7*

I am free from anxiety because things are right between God, myself, and others.

Faithfulness *Proverbs 3:3-4*

I have established a good name with God and with others based on my long-term loyalty to those relationships.

Self-Control *Titus 2:11-13*

I have the power, through Christ, to control myself.

Humility *Philippians 2:3, 4*

I choose to esteem others above myself.

Love *1 John 4:10-12*

I sacrificially and unconditionally love and forgive others.

Patience *Proverbs 14:29*

I take a long time to overheat and endure patiently under the unavoidable pressures of life.

Kindness/Goodness *1 Thess. 5:15*

I choose to do the right things in my relationships with others.

Gentleness *Philippians 4:5*

I am thoughtful, considerate and calm in dealing with others.

Hope *Hebrews 6:19-20*

I can cope with the hardships of life and with death because of the hope I have in Jesus Christ.

About the Authors

Tom Bulick (M.A. in Educational Leadership, Eastern Michigan University, Th.M. in Old Testament, and Ph.D. in Bible Exposition, Dallas Theological Seminary). For more than forty years, Tom has served as pastor, faculty member, and administrator. Tom was Vice President for Student Life and Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Trinity Western University (Vancouver, B.C.) for twelve years before accepting the position of Spiritual Formation Pastor at Pantego Bible Church in 1998. He and his wife Ruth have one son, Zach.

Stephanie Thomas (B.B.A. University of Texas at Arlington). Stephanie is married to James, and they have four children: Elijah, Levi, Ella, and Simon. She and James are Shepherds of the Bailey Community Group. She has attended Pantego Bible Church for more than twenty years and has been on staff for more than five years.



8001 Anderson Blvd.
Ft. Worth, TX 76120
1-866-PANTEGO
Fax 817-275-6403
www.pantego.org

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