



Overcoming Discouragement

Gregg Caruso // Nehemiah 3-4

I. INTRO

- A. We probably have people in the room who have visited the Sistine Chapel [[slide](#)] in the Vatican... Michelangelo's **nine renowned paneled frescoes** depicting Genesis are thought by some people to be the most exquisite art in the history of humanity.



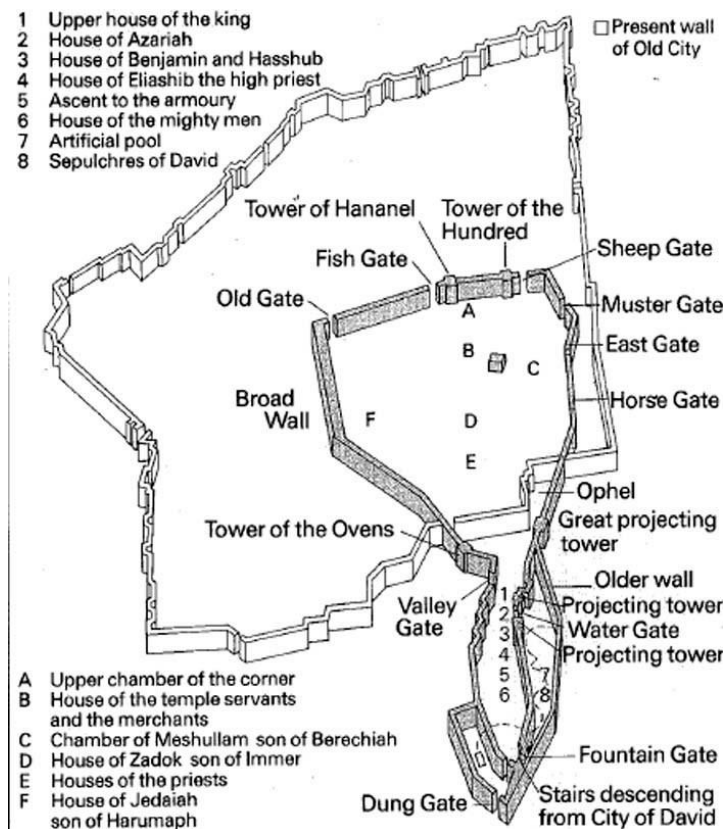
- B. Did you know that Michelangelo suffered from depression and discouragement?
1. He wrote a poem while he was working on the Sistine Chapel (you can find it [online](#)).
 2. The final stanza of the poem says this: My painting is dead. Defend it for me, Giovanni, protect my honor.

I am not in the right place—I am not a painter.

- C. C.S. Lewis once said: "If Satan's arsenal of weapons were restricted to a single one—it would be discouragement." --C.S. Lewis
- D. Discouragement is a disorder unique to human beings (except for, maybe, Eeyore), and discouragement is universal—eventually everyone wrestles with it. There's no doubt that everyone in the room has experienced it—there's probably several people here, or watching online, who are **deeply discouraged** right now. Overcoming discouragement is what we will be looking at from Nehemiah 3-4 today...
- E. We've been studying the book of Nehemiah...
 1. After 70 years of captivity, the Jewish people were given the opportunity to return to their homeland. Out of the some 2-3 million taken into captivity from the land, only about 50,000 decided to return.
 2. The Book of Nehemiah begins 13 years after the Book of Ezra ends; almost 100 years after the first captives began filtering back; and about 150 years after the city of Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians.
 3. The walls of the city of Jerusalem were still in rubble. No one thought this obstacle could be overcome, so the walls lay in ruin and the people were in a state of continual depression and discouragement.
 4. So, to put this in perspective...we've just endured one (really) depressing and discouraging year and the Israelites have endured 150 years of tough times. I hope that makes you feel a little better right now J.
- F. Nehemiah's heart was broken over the condition of Jerusalem and the people who lived there.
 1. He hears the name of God is not being honored in the surrounding region and the exiles that are returning are not being protected.
 2. And also by way of **review**, Nehemiah is a **preview** of **both** Jesus and the Church...
 - a. Neh points us to **Jesus** in that he left the comfort and the opulence of the palace to step into the rubble of the city walls – and the rubble of a deeply discouraged people.

1 <http://biblehub.com/commentaries/guzik/commentaries/1601.htm>

- b. Neh points us to the **Church** in that we have the same calling—to step into the rubble of a broken world to offer the hope and supreme encouragement of the gospel.
3. Neh is a man who loves God and people. He has a passion for God and compassion (lit., to suffer with) for people.
- G. Today we will see the people begin to rise up and build this wall—it’s a beautiful picture of the Church working together. Neh rallies the people and reminds them that the **good hand of God is upon them** (as I have repeatedly seen here at CCC)—and they rally and begin to build the wall.
- H. We should notice that the wall around Jerusalem was much smaller in Neh’s time than the current Old City Wall...



- I. I will read the first five verses of Neh 3 and the first 9 vs. of chap 4: [Leave the above slide up while I read the passage]: *“Then Eliashib the high priest arose with his brothers the priests and built the Sheep Gate; they consecrated it and hung its doors. They consecrated the wall to the Tower of the Hundred and the*

Tower of Hananel. 2 Next to him the men of Jericho built, and next to them Zaccur the son of Imri built. 3 Now the sons of Hassenaah built the Fish Gate; they laid its beams and hung its doors with its bolts and bars. 4 Next to them Meremoth the son of Uriah the son of Hakkoz made repairs. And next to him Meshullam the son of Berechiah the son of Meshezabel made repairs. And next to him Zadok the son of Baana also made repairs. 5 Moreover, next to him the Tekoites² made repairs...

[Chap 4] Now it came about that when Sanballat³ heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became furious and very angry and mocked the Jews. 2 He spoke in the presence of his brothers and the wealthy men of Samaria and said, "What are these feeble Jews doing? Are they going to restore it for themselves? Can they offer sacrifices? Can they finish in a day?

Can they revive the stones from the dusty rubble even the burned

ones?" 3 Now Tobiah the Ammonite was near him and he said, "Even what they are building—if a fox should jump on it, he would break their stone wall down!"

4 Hear, O our God, how we are despised! Return their reproach on their own heads and give them up for plunder in a land of captivity. 5 Do not forgive their iniquity and let not their sin be blotted out before You, for they

have demoralized the builders. 6 So we built the wall and the whole wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work. 7 Now when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repair of the walls of Jerusalem went on, and that the breaches began to be closed, they were very angry. 8 All of them conspired together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause a disturbance in it. 9 But we prayed to our God, and because of them we set up a guard against them day and night. [pray]

II. BODY

A. So, there's 3 main points from **this text** to consider today and each one will help us to **defeat discouragement**:

1. There is a place for EVERYONE to serve in the mission of God.
2. When people are on mission with God there will ALWAYS be opposition.

² From the tribe of Judah.

³ There were 3 vocal opponents of Neh and the Israelites rebuilding the wall. **Sanballat** was a Samaritan and he was associated with **Tobiah**, an Ammonite, and **Geshem** the Arab.

3. The RESPONSE to opposition is (at least 4-fold)—a rhythm of prayer, strategic planning, strong and humble leadership, and attentiveness.
- B. We will look at them one at a time:
1. There is a place for EVERYONE to serve in the mission of God. First of all, we need to ask...
 - a. What IS the mission of God? It becomes quite plain in the NT:
 - b. *“Go therefore [into the rubble] and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing⁴ them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching⁵ them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”* --Matthew 28:19- 20 (emphasis and notation added)
 - c. Now, getting back to Neh 3, Who worked on the walls and the gates? Priests, people from surrounding towns and villages (3:2, 4), we see goldsmiths and perfumers (3:8), merchants (3:32), civic officials (3:14-16), women (3:12), the temple servants all came to make repairs (3:26).
 - d. Nehemiah assigned people to repair portions of the wall outside their own homes. [Genius!!]
 - e. Whatever God is going to do He wants to do through ALL of His people. This chap becomes a beautiful picture of the church. Every person has place and an important role to play. There are high profile places and there are obscure places (i.e., dung gate), but the people came together to build!
 - f. There are several different metaphors for the church listed throughout the NT: the most common one is a **human body**, another is the **bride of Christ**, another is **one new man** (Eph 2:15), another is a **family**. Peter, however, uses construction language when he writes: *“You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual*

⁴ There is something spiritually transforming in being baptized. It is NOT just symbolic. It is a public proclamation of the gospel having captured your heart. And there is a mystical joining to the Person of Christ.

⁵ To instruct, to explain, to teach doctrine, to lead to deeper understanding. Building a bridge from knowledge to activity.

house..." --1 Peter 2:5 [maybe he's thinking about Neh when he's writing??]

g. J.D. Greer – *Gaining by Losing: Why the Future Belongs to Churches that Send* says we need a **fundamental shift** in *how we think* about the mission of the church and illustrates this point using **three types of ships**: 6

- 1) Some church goers see church as a cruise liner, offering Christian luxuries for the whole family—sports, entertainment, childcare services, and business networking.
 - a) They show up at church asking, “Can this church improve my religious quality of life? Does it have good family ministry facilities? Does the pastor preach funny, time-conscious messages that meet my felt needs? Do I like the music?”
 - b) If their church ever ceases to cater to their preferences... well, there are plenty of other cruise ships in the harbor. In fact, often they get involved with three or four of them at once.
- 2) Greer writes: Other Christians believe their church is more like a battleship. The church is made for mission, and its success should be seen in how loudly and dramatically it fights for the mission.
 - a) This is certainly better than “cruise ship”; however, it implies that the church, as an institution, does most of the fighting.
 - b) The role of church members is to pay the staff to find the targets and fire the guns each week as they gather to watch. They see the programs, services, and ministries of the church as the primary instruments of mission.
- 3) Greer suggests a **third metaphor** for the church: aircraft carrier. Like battleships, aircraft carriers engage in battle, but not in the same way. Aircraft carriers prepare and equip planes to carry

the battle elsewhere. Loading people up and launching them into their ministry.

- 4) This is certainly more in line with Eph 4:12: The role of vocational ministry staff is, *“equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.”* --

Ephesians 4:12

- h. This is why so many people have become so bored with church. There has to be more than simply coming and listening.
 - i. The church does not necessarily need more programs, what it needs is more people who take ownership of God’s mission and **move from consumers to contributors** and who will step into the rubble and say, “I’m going to be part of the mission of God.”
 - j. The people who jumped in to re-build the wall were normal people who discovered that God was up to something and they wanted to bring what they had to the table and contribute.
 - k. Getting involved in the mission of the church won’t guarantee that we will never experience discouragement, yet it will focus us on something bigger than ourselves and will reduce the weight of discouragement on our souls.
2. When people are on mission with God there will ALWAYS be opposition. (We saw this in our study of the Beatitudes, remember? The final Beatitude is persecution— and like Jesus experienced, the worse persecution will come from religious and moralistic people.)
 - a. There are three forms of opposition listed in chapter four:
 - 1) Outright ridicule and taunting that leads to demoralization (4:1- 5).
CRITICISM: “No leader is exempt from criticism, and one’s humility will nowhere be seen more clearly than in the manner in which one accepts and reacts to it. Samuel Brengle, who was noted for his sense of genuine holiness, had been subjected to caustic criticism. Instead of replying in kind or resorting to self- justification, he replied: ‘From my heart I thank you for your rebuke. I think I deserved it. Will you, my [friend], remember me in prayer?’ On another occasion, a biting, censorious attack was made on his spiritual life. His answer was: ‘I thank you for your criticism of my life. It set me to self-examination and heart-

searching and prayer, which always leads me into a deeper sense of my utter dependence on Jesus for holiness of heart, and into sweeter fellowship with Him.”⁷

2) Personal discouragement. “...*We ourselves are unable to rebuild the wall.*”
--Nehemiah 4:10

a) Personal discouragement can be amplified by the lingering rubble in our own lives. Things like pride, unreasonable guilt and shame, anger, lust, fear, materialism. We become secure in our insecurities because, at least, they’re familiar.

b) There have been several famous preachers over the years that have suffered from severe depression. One is D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, a medical doctor who became a pastor in London in the mid-twentieth century.

i. Here’s what he wrote in his book *Spiritual Depression*: “Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself? --

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones

ii. Then he quotes from Psalm 42: “*Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him for the help of His presence. 6 O my God, my soul is in despair within me; therefore, I remember You...*” --Psalms 42:5-6

iii. Lloyd-Jones says of the psalmist: “His soul had been repressing him, crushing him. So, he stands up and says: ‘Self, listen for a moment, I will speak to you.’”⁹

3) A third form of opposition is Friendly fire. Look at 4:12: “*When the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times, ‘They*

⁷ Sanders J. Oswald. *Spiritual Leadership: Principles of Excellence for Every Believer*, Reissued 2017, Moody Press: 120.

⁸ A psalm of the sons of Korah.

⁹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cures*, Eerdmans 1965: 20-21.

will come up against us from every place where you may turn.”

--Nehemiah 4:12 [Don't rock the boat!]

3. The RESPONSE to opposition is a rhythm of prayer, strategic planning, strong and humble leadership, and attentiveness.

a. We have seen the rhythm of prayer throughout Nehemiah's narrative so far—and it comes into play again in 4:4-5 and then again in v. 9: *“But we prayed to our God.”* --Nehemiah 4:9 [rhythm of prayer]

b. We see the effect of Nehemiah's Strategic planning in v. 13 and vs. 16-20:

1) V. 13: *“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.”* --Nehemiah 4:13 [leadership genius]

2) One of the best reasons for us to study Neh is to see that **prayer and planning are not at odds with each other**. Nehemiah models for us the biblical balance of waiting on God in prayer as well as strategic thinking and planning.

c. We see Strong and humble leadership in v. 14: Nehemiah gathers the people and declares: *“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 houses.”* --Nehemiah 4:14 (emphasis added)

d. We see Attentiveness in vs. 22-23: *“At that time I also said to the people, ‘Let each man with his servant spend the night within Jerusalem so that they may be a guard for us by night and a laborer by day.’ 23 So neither I, my brothers, my servants, nor the men of the guard who followed me, none of us removed our clothes, each took his weapon even to the water.”* --Nehemiah 4:22-23

III. CONCLUSION: When all is said and done, we fight the enemy of discouragement by 1) joining the mission of God, 2) facing the opposition, and 3) responding with prayer, planning, humble leadership, and attentiveness.

IV. COMMUNION

- A. Theologian B.B. Warfield described “the OT as a richly furnished but dimly lit room. Only when the light is turned on do the contents become clear.”¹⁰ **What does that mean?**
1. It means that, with the birth, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, that the light has been switched on—and we begin to see the OT really only tells one story – it’s the longing, the anticipation of the coming **Messiah-King-Redeemer** who will establish an eternal government that can only be seen with the eyes of faith.
 2. Bono/U2/Walk On: “You're packing a suitcase for a place none of us has been. A place that has to be believed to be seen.”
- B. Nehemiah is an historical narrative in its own right. It happened. It’s history. Yet in the light of the coming of Jesus it takes on fresh meaning and insight.
- C. The moral of the narrative is NOT, be like Nehemiah, the moral of the narrative is, how does Nehemiah point us to Jesus?
1. Nehemiah came out of the palace into the rubble. Jesus came out of heaven into the rubble.
 2. Nehemiah provided a vision to rebuild the walls. Jesus provided a vision to rebuild the people of God—now defined as the Church (“called out ones”).
- D. This is what we celebrate today – Jesus coming out of heaven and into our brokenness to set us free from our addiction to selfishness and sin – and to proclaim His beauty and majesty to a lost, broken, and deeply discouraged people.
- E. The body of Jesus was broken and His blood was shed so that we could be liberated...

¹⁰ B.B. Warfield, *Biblical Doctrines*, Baker (Reprint: 1932) 2003: 141-42.