Building and Battling
Nehemiah 4

So we're in the book of Nehemiah, a book which records the extraordinary rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls, under Nehemiah's leadership. But as you know very well, just because you think something's a good idea, does not mean that everyone else sees it the same way, does it? And Nehemiah's efforts to build up the city, and honour God's name, were not met with universal acclaim. Instead, he faced growing opposition and threats.

And this matters for us. Because the sad truth is, that if you want to serve the good of God's people, and work for the honour of God's name, you will also encounter opposition. So it helps to know what that's going to look like, and how to handle it. And that's what we're going to see today.

Nehemiah 4

So Nehemiah and the people face opposition from three significant individuals, Jim Packer calls them 'the unholy trinity': Sanballat, governor of Samaria, Tobiah, governor of Ammon, and Geshem, a powerful Arab tribal leader. And their aim was to snuff out Nehemiah's work as quickly as possible, and we can guess why.

You see Nehemiah has come to Jerusalem to do good for others. But that's not what's motivating Sanballat and his cronies. What concerns them is their own power and influence and profit, because they stand to lose out if Jerusalem grows in strength and confidence.

And that should tell you something. You see, when Jerusalem was powerless, Sanballat and his friends didn't give it a thought. But now, they're rattled. So, whilst they mock Nehemiah, that's not because they think it's all a big joke. It's the exact opposite. The missiles start coming in precisely because they feel threatened, because Nehemiah and the people are beginning to turn things around, and the enemy is increasingly alarmed.

And I want you to see the encouragement in that. You see, when you care about the state of God's people and the honour of God's name, when you are attempting to reach out to the lost, or the vulnerable, or when you are seeking to rebuild the wrecked walls of your faith or your marriage, or whatever your ruined city is for you, and you start facing opposition or difficulty, it's not because you're a joke. It's because you're on to something.

You see, whilst God builds and protects, and we should do the same, the forces of darkness undermine and destroy.

And whilst the human opposition we face may differ from Nehemiah, the dark powers behind the scenes don't. As Paul writes, ultimately 'we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but… against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places' (Eph 6:12). Now, if we're honest, talk of forces of darkness may seem like the stuff of fairy tales to you. But you only have to look at the state of the world, and see the level of wickedness that is greater than the sum of those who practice it, to begin to agree with what the Bible says. And because it is these same forces of evil at work each time their patterns of attack are predictable. That's why Paul can write that we do not need to be 'outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs' (2 Cor 2:11). So, you don't have to be caught off guard at the way God's work in your life get's disrupted. Instead you can predict it and take defensive action.

So from Nehemiah's experience I want us to see…

The Tactics of the Enemy:

And the first one here is:

Ridicule
Now off the top of my head I can think of two occasions when I faced public ridicule at the hands of someone else. And when you are made to look a fool in front of others it is deeply humiliating, isn't it? None of us like to be ridiculed.

And that is the first weapon the enemy deploys against Nehemiah and the people: v1-2: 'Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews. 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 sacrifice? Will they finish up in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, and burned ones at that?"'

So, can you see what he does? He belittles them: these *feeble, pathetic* Jews! He mocks their ambition: do they *really* think they can rebuild the wall!? He jeers at their faith: Will they sacrifice? Do they seriously think that their God is going to help them?! And finally, he undermines their confidence: don't tell me they think they can do this in a few days! O, please!'

And when it comes to your faith – ridicule can be incredibly destructive can't it? You are made to feel stupid to believe what you believe. And when you try and answer that with facts and logic it just seems stale and even more stupid.

But, if ridicule is bad enough when you *can* give an answer, think how much worse it is when the ridicule is based on truth. Because that's the case with Sanballat's mocking questions, isn't it? The Jews were weak. The scale of the task was huge. The city was a pile of rubble. Their situation was hopeless.

And while the Bible calls the devil the father of lies, he doesn't need to trade on lies to ridicule you, does he? He can just point out the truth. That whispering voice of condemnation that reminds you of how you've failed, or of how inconsistent you are as a Christian, or of how weak and powerless you really are. He doesn't need to invent anything, he just has to hold up a mirror to our lives. And our confidence and joy are suffocated in a fog of despair.

But the second tactic we see the enemy deploy here is:

Fear
Verse 8: 'They all [that's the combined enemy forces] plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and cause confusion in it.' Then v11, 'And our enemies said, "They will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work."'

And if you remember, towns from around Jerusalem had sent their men to help rebuild the wall. But as the threat from the enemy grew, the people from these outlying areas realised that with their fittest men gone, they too were in danger. As Nehemiah reports in v12, 'At that time the Jews who lived near them came from all directions and said to

us ten times, "You must return to us."' 'Men, you've got to come home. You're putting our own families at risk. This has got to stop.'

So can you see what's going on? It's the power of fear. They're facing the fear of what others might do to them if they carry on. Now you're unlikely to face physical threats. But what about the fear of what it might cost you, or what others might say about you in the office or on campus if you take a stand for what's right, or if you want to see change for good in some area?

But then on top of that, Nehemiah and the people knew they were outnumbered, and there's the fear of being in the minority, the fear of being on wrong side of history: that if all these other people think what we're doing is crazy, maybe they're right and we're wrong.

Now, when I was boy I used to work on a strawberry field on a local farm. And it was my job to sell the strawberries and lock up at the end of the day. And in the field was this broken down caravan, a stone's throw from where I worked. And in the daytime I would never have given that caravan another thought. But when dusk had fallen, and I was alone in this deserted field and it began to get dark, that caravan became the haunt of maniacs and murderers. Things always seem worse in the dark. And the fear of attack that Nehemiah's enemies have created is exacerbated by the implication that the attack will come at night.

And when things are dark in your own life, fears multiply, don't they? If you already feel weighed down, and life is overshadowed and darkened by depression, or guilt, or stress, then you can be even more vulnerable to fear and insecurity.

But fear, stopping you doing what's right, doesn't have to come from others, does it? It can be entirely internal: the fear of losing control over this person if you forgive them. The fear of loss of face if you humble yourself in this area. The fear of failure in the sight of others, if you do this thing.

And in all those circumstances it is fear, fear of the consequences that stops us doing the right thing.

But thirdly, there is:

Discouragement

Verse 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."' As the scale of what they face increasingly dawns on the workers, all the rubble they are going to have to move, discouragement grows. Their physical and emotional strength is beginning to crack.

You know, it's much easier to start a work than finish it, isn't it? When you start something, there is this buzz. But then that initial excitement wanes, and you enter the hard slog, and discouragement can set in. You set out to rebuild the walls, maybe that's in your relationship, or your faith, or against some sin in your life, and to start with things seem to go well, but then things start slipping or progress seems small and change isn't as quick as you'd hoped. And you think, is this really worth it?

And discouragement is a tool in the hands of the enemy precisely because it saps our resolve for good and for God.

But what is so encouraging about Nehemiah is that he shows us that the enemy doesn't have to have the last laugh.

Fighting Back
You see, the extraordinary thing about Nehemiah is that despite all these tactics, he and the people did do the impossible and rebuild the wall. So, how did they do it?

Remember God
Instead of staring dejectedly at ridicule, fear and discouragement, Nehemiah keeps putting God and his greatness in front of himself, and the people.

So, instead of meeting ridicule with ridicule, as you and I might do, Nehemiah meets it with prayer. Verse 4, "Hear, O our God, for we are despised." Nehemiah doesn't need to retaliate verbally because he knows he has someone better to fight for him than himself. And he prays both for God's help and for God's judgment on his enemies.

But Jesus calls you and me to go further, and to pray *for* our enemies, and to bless those who persecute us. But how can you do that?

You can do it when you understand what Nehemiah tells the people to do in v14: "Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome." Now, why does he tell them to remember the Lord? Because when you feel ridiculed or fearful or discouraged it is easy to forget him! But it's by remembering him, by remembering all that Jesus has done for you, by speaking the Gospel to yourself, that you can stand up under ridicule and forgive those who do it.

You see, Sanballat calls them, 'these feeble Jews'. But there is nothing weaker, or more feeble than the Son of God nailed to a cross, surrounded by people ridiculing him. And when you understand that Christ, the one with all the power became powerless for you and went to the cross to rescue you, because he loves you, because he chooses you, weak and feeble and full of failure though you are; when you know Christ's love for you like that, though ridicule will still sting, you will know, deep down whose opinion of you really matters.

And Jesus knew what it was to experience the darkness and the danger of a night-time attack – he was arrested at night, and the sun went dark at the cross. And when you know deep on the inside that the Son of God, the Light of the World, was willing to be taken in darkness, and die in darkness, for you, then you know he will not let you go when you face darkness. And when you know that, then fear loses its hold on you, even when life is dark.

But as Nehemiah urges them to remember God, he also reminds them, v20, 'Our God will fight for us.' 'If we are attacked' he says, 'God will be here, fighting.' And you and I can be rock solid in the face of attack, knowing the same. But not because of some vague hope of what God might do in the future, but because of what he *has* done. How in the resurrection of Christ from the dead, God has already fought and won. Your sin has been atoned for – so you don't have to sink under guilt. His love for you has been demonstrated, so you don't have to crumble under discouragement.

You see, in their discouragement the people were saying, v10, 'There is too much rubble. By ourselves we will not be able to rebuild the walls.' And when you look at the wreckage of this problem that you face, and at your own inability to sort it, it is easy to become discouraged. And the people were right – on their own they could not rebuild the walls. But they weren't on their own, and neither are you. God has fought for you at the cross to give you everything you need. In the resurrection Christ has conquered every power against you. Your God has and will fight for you. So when you know the gospel, how you live will not determined by the scale of the problem before you, it will be determined by remembering the Lord, who is great and awesome.

But the second thing we can learn from Nehemiah is to…

Do the Next Thing

Nehemiah and the people didn't just pray. They prayed, and then, v6, 'we built the wall.' Nehemiah heard the enemy's ridicule and went 'ok, we've heard what they've got to say, so… let's get back to work boys.' And they went back to the simple task of putting the next stone in place. There is no clearer or more satisfying way to defeat the enemy's designs than by keeping on doing the right thing; to do the next thing that's at hand to fulfil what God has called you to do: to keep loving, to keep serving, to keep building. To do that sacrificial act, even when it hurts. To reach out to that person, even when you'd rather not. To choose to forgive that person even when you're afraid to. To do the next thing that the enemy doesn't want you to do, and put the next stone in place.

But thirdly,

Arm Yourself

Now, when Nehemiah's day to stand against in the day of evil came, he wasn't passive, was he? Verse 9: 'And we prayed to our God and set a guard.' So, trusting God was not a reason not to arm the men. In fact, he turned Jerusalem into a barracks. In v16 he tells us he organised half the men as soldiers and half as builders, and the builders worked either with sword in hand, or strapped to their side.

Now in the First World War it was said that the British soldiers were lions led by donkeys. That's not the case here: Nehemiah was a lion leading them. In v23 he says of himself and his key men, 'none of us took off our clothes; each kept his weapon at his right hand.' So Nehemiah led by example and was willing to give his life for the cause.

And his call to these men was to resist passivity: v14, 'Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight.'

It's not hard to see why the New Testament writers use the imagery of a soldier to describe the Christian life. Here we see Nehemiah arming the people, and in the same way Paul tells us that we are to 'put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil' (Eph 6:11). Armed with 'the belt of truth' – the truth of what God says about himself and about us; armed with 'the breastplate of righteousness', that we are accepted by God not because we have never failed, but because Christ has never failed; armed with 'the shoes of the readiness of the gospel of peace' – to take that good news out into the world that needs it so badly; armed with 'the shield of faith' – faith in God and what he has done for us in Christ; armed with 'the helmet of salvation' – that tells our minds that Jesus has saved us and that if God is for

us, who can be against us. And finally, armed with the sword of the Spirit, the word of God – as we speak the gospel to ourselves to slay these enemies of fear and doubt and discouragement.

There's a wonderful verse in the hymn, Praise to the Holiest in the Heights that goes: *O loving wisdom of our God! When all was sin and shame, a second Adam to the fight and to the rescue came*. You see, the first Adam failed to fight the enemy who came for him and his wife in the garden, but Christ, the second Adam, confronted that same enemy, not this time in a garden, but in the rubble of a ruined garden, that as Nehemiah stood in a ruined city and armed his men among the burnt and broken stones, so Christ stood in the wilderness, surrounded by the burnt and broken rocks of the desert, and parried every one of Satan's temptations with the sword of the Spirit, as he quotes Scripture after Scripture back at him.

And here we see Nehemiah, standing as a soldier, on the frontline, ready to give his life for the protection of the people. And yet, that need never arose. But as we approach Easter another soldier, another leader of God's people came. And this time the enemy did attack, and Christ did not shrink from the battle, but gave his life to protect and defend you. And when you realize that he fought for you and gave himself for you, you'll find the courage to fight, to take up these weapons and fight sin in your own life and the evil and unrighteousness that blights the lives of others.

Which brings us to the final strategy Nehemiah deploys to combat the enemy.

Find a Platoon.
Nehemiah doesn't simply arm the builders, he organises them into smaller fighting units: v13, 'I stationed the people by their clans, with their swords.' So he doesn't just encourage them to fight for their families, he arranges things so they fight with their families, with their friends. So this was never, 'every man for himself.' They were to fight together.

And the same is true for us. We need one another, and others need you. It's why if you're not in a home group I'd really encourage you to get in one: for your sake, but also so you're there for others.

You see, when you've been wounded by one of the enemy's arrows, and you're feeling discouraged, or slimed by sin and guilt, it's so easy to withdraw, isn't it? But it's then more than ever that you need your friends. And when they're facing that, they need you. Because when Paul talks about the shield of faith that extinguishes all the flaming arrows of the evil one, he's talking about the Roman shield that was famously used in those tortoiseshell formations. The soldiers would link shields above, in front and one the sides, and could advance against the enemy's position under a hail of arrows. But if they each did it on their own, they'd have been cut down.

So if we are to resist these attacks of ridicule, fear and discouragement, and we can, then we need to remember God, do the next thing, arm ourselves, and join a platoon where you can link arms with some fellow soldiers and stand together in the day of evil.