

## Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

### SERMON SERIES: Forward! Together!

(studies in Nehemiah)

### **When the Arrows Fly**

(Nehemiah chapters 4:1-23; 6:1-14)

Study #8

#### Introduction: Distractions...

The problem with distraction is that they are SO DISTRACTING.

I'll sit down at my computer to start working on a couple of things and will make the mistake of opening up Outlook, only to find an email (often from Michael O'Brien...) with an attachment that totally distracts me from my work.

Or, I'll get distracted from what I need to be doing by a desire to check the Web for the latest news on the bailout or the presidential race.

Or at home I'll get distracted from an engaging conversation with Kathy by a TV show.

You get the idea.

I'll bet most of us battle distractions. If we could win the battle over distractions, we'd accomplish many of the goals we've set for ourselves.

If a church could win the battle over distractions and interferences and obstructions and FOCUS with a single-eyed intensity on its mission, that church - by God's grace - would be able to accomplish its goals.

Today, we watch as Nehemiah and the Jews of Jerusalem face a dizzying array of interferences and distractions. All of these distractions came from outside sources. They were distractions and interferences sent by those who were opposed to what the Jews were trying to do for God.

Over the course of two chapters, the Bible lets us see five different scenarios. We'll watch three of them today.

In each scene, the Jews are opposed in what they want to do for God. In each scene, they respond. And in each scene they respond differently, each time appropriate to the interference they face.

The first phase of the outside interference comes from a guy who was famous for his hatred of the Jews - Sanballat.

#### When Ridiculed (4:1-6)

**The Message? "You don't have it in you to do what you want to do for God." (4:1-3)**

*The opposition of Sanballat (vv. 1-2)*

***[1] Now it came about that when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became furious and very angry and mocked the Jews.***

Every group has a leader. Sanballat was the leader of those who opposed the Jews. He was upset because he knew that if Jerusalem became politically and militarily strong - which she likely would if her walls were rebuilt - his own nation (Samaria) would be weakened.

So, to his own countrymen - but certainly within earshot of the Jews! - he spoke his mind about the work of God.

Sanballat was not picking a fight. He wanted to take the fight out of his enemies. His words were aimed at DEMORALIZING the builders.

For some weeks the Jews have thrown themselves into the work, laboring night and day. They worked hard at building the best walls and gates they could. Now they are getting laughed at.

Have you ever been laughed at? Most of us know the pain of having been laughed at for one reason or another. Ridicule and mockery **sting**.

That old line, “*Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me*” doesn’t apply to most of us. Words meant to demoralize usually do the trick.

Sanballat fired away with a shotgun blast of five questions aimed at the hearts of the Jewish workers.

First, he confirmed their own worst fears about themselves when he asked, [2] “*What are these feeble<sup>1</sup> Jews doing?*”

Like that memorable scene in **ROCKY** (the original, the first, the classic), on the night before the big fight with Apollo Creed, Rocky Balboa realized that he didn’t have a chance to win the heavyweight title fight. He didn’t have what it takes. So here, Sanballat wanted to convince the Jews that they didn’t have “the right stuff”!

Listen to the rest of the barbed questions:

- He disses the Jews’ strength.  
 (“*Are they going to restore it for themselves?*”);
- He tells them that God is not in the project anyway.  
 (“*Can they offer sacrifices?*”);
- He makes fun of how long it is taking them.  
 (“*Can they finish in a day?*”);
- He makes fun of the building materials.  
 (“*Can they revive the stones from the dusty rubble even the burned ones?*”)

These questions are skillfully phrased. They are aimed right at the heart of God’s people. And the heart attacks continue, with the next attacks coming from one of Sanballat’s sidekicks, Tobiah.

*The opposition of Tobiah (v. 3)*

[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.”*

Clearly, Tobiah was attempting the same thing Sanballat was. He was all about *discouraging* and *demoralizing* and *deflating* the workers.

Now, such attacks must be countered. How should God’s people fight back when they face this kind of a heart attack?

Maybe you’ve had someone tell you that you CANNOT do something that you’ve had your heart set on doing. Maybe it was a coach who told you to not even bother going out for the team. Maybe it was a parent who wouldn’t dream with you about a career move.

Those are heart attacks. When they hit, there is the temptation to throw in the towel and abandon your dream.

Watch what Nehemiah does.

### **Prayer Paves the Way Forward (4:4-6)**

[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.”*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In fact, this prayer is still perfectly appropriate for Christians today, when it is directed against our real enemy. Listen to these words from the New Testament which describe the normal Christian experience. “*For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses.*” (2 Cor. 10:3-4) And again, “*For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world-forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.*” (Ephesians 6:10) We are at war, but we have to be sure we remember who our real enemy is! We don’t want to fight the (human) victims of our (spiritual) enemy.

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<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew word used here for “*feeble*” was used to describe a small plant that was withering under the hot Palestinian sun.

Now if that seems like a somewhat tough prayer, just think of what he could have done.

- He could have taken the initiative against the enemies and fought them, personally.
- He could have held a pep rally for the builders.

He could have done a number of things. Some of them even good things. But, he did the best thing. He prayed.

Now prayer isn't the ONLY thing that needs to happen when there is an attack on our hearts. And it isn't usually the LAST thing that occurs at a time of crisis.

But I do love what Nehemiah does here. He prays as a matter of first resort. And his example is tailor-made for our church AT THIS TIME.

It is possible that we, here at Northwest Community Church, might get the idea that *"we don't have what it takes to do what we want to do for God."*

Let's be honest.

While the reality is that the vast majority of churches in the United States are our size or a little bit smaller, it is tempting to think that the real ministry that is going on in these days is being accomplished by churches larger than our own.

Please understand. This is not sour grapes from a smaller-church pastor. Now I happen to think that churches with multiple thousands of attenders like Oak Hills and Wayside Chapel and Community Bible and BRCC - and others! - are great blessings to our city. They are places of great impact. And I'm glad that they are here.

But I don't think for a minute that the mega-churches are the only churches where there is impact being made. And I want Northwest Community Church to be a church of impact, too, making a HUGE contribution to Jesus' Great Commission here in San Antonio and around the world.

- We've recently begun a men's recovery Bible study because we want to be a resource for men - and I hope and pray for women soon, as well - who struggle with hurts, habits, and hang-ups.
- We're running an evangelism training course on Sundays after church because we want to become people who regularly see men and women and youth and children put their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.
- We support missionaries who serve in strategic places around the world.
- At the most recent Elders' meeting, the Elders affirmed our passionate desire to become more Great Commission-focused at Northwest.

You should know that I've never had a life goal to pastor what is usually called a "mega-church."

But that doesn't mean that I don't have a vision for our church becoming a change agent in our community and a church of great impact.

I do want us to be a church of **hundreds** that impacts **tens of thousands** for Jesus. I do want to see our Worship Center filled three times per Sunday with people who are hungry to know the Lord and to grow in Christ. I do want us to have an impact that far surpasses what anyone would expect given the size of our church. I want to see Northwest be a Great Commission FORCE!

Quick! When I said that - *"I want to see Northwest be a Great Commission FORCE!"* - what popped into your mind?

Something like, *"Come on, Dave, leave that talk to the mega-churches and to the para-church organizations. We aren't big enough to be meaningfully involved in the Great Commission. Evangelistic impact and meaningful salt and light ministries are for other churches. We don't have what it takes to pull it off."*

Friends, if those thoughts, or any thoughts like those are coursing through your brain, you have been victimized by a heart attack from the enemy!

Those thoughts are no different from what the enemies of Nehemiah were saying to the Jews of Jerusalem.

And what did Nehemiah do when those heart attacks came? He prayed. What happened after he prayed?

**[6] So we built the wall and the whole wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind** (literally, a **HEART**) **to work.**

The work resumed after prayer.

I'm willing to bet that prior to Nehemiah's arrival in Jerusalem and the beginning of the wall rebuilding campaign, not much prayer was being offered by the Jews in the city.

But, when the people of God became vitally involved in the work of God, they put themselves in the enemies' crosshairs. Being targets of enemy fire put them in need of prayer, which led to their experience of the power of God.

Is prayer necessary? You bet it is!

But only if we are serious about carrying out Jesus' commands, only if we are aggressive in evangelism, only if we are taking risks that serve to give others a taste of His love, only if we are living in such a way as to be salt and light to our family, friends, and neighbors.

Demoralizing thoughts will come our way if we ramp up efforts to obey Jesus. When those thoughts come, we need to pray.

So, as of verse 6, everything is going great again. But it's a little early to start planning the "**MISSION: ACCOMPLISHED**" party.

Very shortly, the enemies launch the second phase of an attempt to halt the work, causing the workers to plummet from the peaks back to the pits.

### When Bullied (4:7-23)

**The Message? "We won't let you do what you want to do for God." (4:7-12)**

**[7] Now when Sanballat** (the Samaritan), **Tobiah** (the Ammonite), **the Arabs**<sup>3</sup> (living to the south and the west of Palestine), **the Ammonites**

<sup>3</sup> The Arabs were probably led by Geshem, someone we will get to know better later in the book.

(Tobiah's people and enemies of the Jews dating back to the time of Abraham and Lot - see Genesis 19), **and the Ashdodites** (the western-most enemies, living near the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, they were old enemies of Judah, dating back to the days of Saul and David, previously known as Philistines) **heard that the repair of the walls of Jerusalem went on, and that the breaches began to be closed, they were very angry. [8] And all of them conspired together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause a disturbance in it.**

Here is a more pro-active attempt to stop the work. The enemies are planning on military action. This is getting dangerous.

What will our friends in Jerusalem do in response?

### **A Dual Defense**

*First defense: prayer! (v. 9)*

**[9] But WE prayed to OUR God...**

Interesting. Up to this point it has always been Nehemiah praying. This is the first time we hear "**WE PRAYED.**" Now, all the people are getting the same vision for dependent trust on God that Nehemiah has. Fantastic!

They prayed - but that is not all they did.

*Second defense: work/watch (vv. 9-23)*

**[9]...and because of them we set up a guard against them day and night.**

### Guards around the city

What a great idea! They set up a 24-hour guard around the city. This wasn't action **instead of** prayer. It wasn't evidence of a lack of faith. Their preparedness went hand in glove with their trust in the Lord.

But, the enemies' opposition had seriously wounded the Jews' psyche and had put the spirits of the builders in a tailspin.

You can tell that they were in bad shape by the songs being played by garage bands of the day. Verse 10 gives us one of the most popular songs being sung in Jerusalem at this time.

Wounded psyches

*[10] Thus in Judah it was said,  
“The strength of the burden bearers is failing,  
Yet there is much rubbish;  
And we ourselves are unable  
To rebuild the wall.”*

How’s that for a catchy little tune!?

What’s happened? Is there any more rubbish now than there was earlier, when the people had a mind/heart to work? No. Are they any weaker than they were at the beginning? NO!<sup>4</sup>

The problem is that attacks that go on and on and on have a cumulative draining effect. And the repeated attacks, interferences, and distractions thrown their way by the enemies has worn the workers down.<sup>5</sup>

Now the Jews are RE-demoralized! But under Nehemiah’s leadership they follow a plan that leads from the pits back up to the peak.

Think military (vv. 13-14)

*[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 bow (and vv. 16-23)*

Nehemiah set the people up for battle. He didn’t tell them to sue for peace, raise a white flag or surrender.

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<sup>4</sup> Were the waves any bigger on the Sea of Galilee when Peter started to sink? No. Was the wind howling any louder when he went down than when he had been walking toward Jesus on the surface? No.

<sup>5</sup> *[11] Our enemies said, “They will not know or see until we come among them, kill them, and put a stop to the work.” [12] When the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times, “They will come up against us from every place where you may turn...”*

No! The message is, *“Facing opposition is part and parcel of serving God. We’ll have to deal with these roadblocks to progress. BUT THIS WALL IS GETTING BUILT!”*

You know as well as I do about the sufferings endured by Christians around the world today and in times past. Some of our brothers and sisters in Christ in far away places are subjected to terrible sufferings - just because they profess faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>6</sup>

And they **FIGHT** for the privilege of continuing to serve Jesus, despite hardships.

They aren’t picking up swords and spears to fight. But they are putting on the whole armor of God (sword, shield, belt, breastplate and helmet) so that they won’t lose heart in the fight to love God and to love people - even their enemies.

Though the centuries, believers have listened to people say, in various ways, *“We will keep you from doing what you want to do for God.”*

And, through the centuries God’s people have successfully negotiated that threat by doing exactly what the Jews of Jerusalem did. Pray. Take up the armor God makes available. Remember the Lord!

*[14] When I saw their fear, I rose and spoke to the nobles, the officials, and 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 houses.”*

How’s that for a pre-battle speech?

It’s as good a speech as anything you’ve heard in **Braveheart** (Mel Gibson as William Wallace) or **The Lord of the Rings** (Viggo Mortenson as Aragorn)!

And after the Jews provided protection and prayed - the enemies retreated and work on the wall resumed!

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<sup>6</sup> In 1999, Todd Havekost and I spent time with some dear believers in Russia who experience suffering as a matter of course simply because they follow Jesus.

Forward! Together! (15-18)

***[15] When our enemies heard that it was known to us, and that God had frustrated their plan, then all of us returned to the wall, each one to his work.***

I think it is significant that the opposition began where it did in the work on the Jerusalem walls. It began right about the half-way point.

The half-way mark is often where we encounter our first opposition and our first temptation to quit the work. Expect it. Don't be surprised by it.

The beginning stages of most any project are energizing.

Whether it is a get-fit regimen or a weight-loss effort or a stop-a-bad-habit-attempt or a new household budget, the first few days of a project usually yield dramatic results.

But inevitably, progress slows. The weight doesn't come off so quickly. Money doesn't stockpile as rapidly and debt doesn't disappear as fast as you wish it would.

And that is when the thought, "QUIT" comes to mind. It can happen when it comes to serving Jesus as easily as it can happen with weight loss.

- You aren't getting many compliments from onlookers for what you are doing. (Sunday School; Deacon or Ministry Coordinator work)
- You are getting some unasked for "constructive criticism." (maybe about the kind of leadership you are providing)
- Someone may actually oppose what you are doing - be it a Bible study at work, witnessing at school, or giving time, money or energy to help someone less fortunate than you are.
- Your efforts at leading your family in spiritual matters isn't received with enthusiasm.

That's the time to take up the armor of God and say, with Nehemiah, *"Nothing is keeping me off this wall. By the power God supplies, I'm going to keep on keeping on when it comes to building this part of the wall - MY part of the wall - be it worship, love, or service!"*

And there is one more form of opposition we will see today.

Skip on down to chapter 6. There, the building project is almost finished. All the workers have left to do is hang the doors! But, "almost finished" is miles away from "finished."

**When Distracted (6:1-4)**

**The Message? "We'll defeat you by distracting you from your mission." (vv. 1-2)**

***[1] Now when it was reported to Sanballat, Tobiah, to Geshem the Arab, and to the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall, and that no breach remained in it, although at that time I had not set up the doors in the gates, [2] then Sanballat and Geshem sent a message to me, saying, "Come, let us meet together at Chephirim in the plain of Ono."<sup>7</sup> But they were planning to harm me.***

Israel's neighbors knew that the work on the walls was going forward - and they were not pleased! They have failed to stop the work through mockery and intimidation.

What will they do now? Hey, when overt attempts don't work, try scheduling a meeting. A meeting might be just what the doctor ordered to keep the people of God off the wall.

So, Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem suggested that most insidious of all diversions from real work - a "meeting."

The proposed meeting was to be held at a place called Chephirim, on the plains of Ono, about 27 miles northwest of Jerusalem.

How will Nehemiah respond to this invitation? Watch!

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<sup>7</sup> Valley of Ono = the valley of the craftsmen (11:35)

## Staying on track, with a little help from the word “NO”! (vv. 3-4)

*“I’m doing a GREAT work” (v. 3)*

***[3] So I sent messengers to them saying, “I am doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you?”***

He had traveled 800 miles from Persia to Palestine and had risked his life to restore Jerusalem to her former glory by building secure walls.

Why should he jeopardize all of that by taking time out for a meeting when the work is about finished! It didn’t make sense to him to stop the work so that he could go to a meeting. So, he said, “No!”

With Nehemiah, we must learn that “No” is not a four letter word. “No” is a great word for people (and churches) who want to stay focused on the wall.

We say, *“Way to go, Nehemiah! ‘NO’ was the right song to sing. Don’t let yourself get sidetracked.”*

But the trio of enemies was persistent!

*No! No! No! No! (v. 4)*

***[4] They sent messages to me four times in this manner, and I answered them in the same way.***

These were persistent enemies. But Nehemiah was more persistent still! Four times he gave them the exact same response to their request! **No! No! No! No!**<sup>8</sup>

Did it sound impressive to be invited to attend a high level negotiating meeting with foreign dignitaries? Kind of appealing?

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<sup>8</sup> The prophet Jeremiah was another who knew the value of persistence. In Jeremiah 25:3-5, he told the Israelites, *“for 23 years.....the word of the Lord has come to me, and I have spoken persistently to you...”* Day in, and day out, he never allowed himself to be sidetracked or diverted.

Not to Nehemiah, because such a meeting would have taken him away from the wall.

## Conclusion:

Brothers and sisters, if there is an attack that is most similar to an attack that might be waged against us today, it may be this one - **DISTRACTION.**

I mentioned some of the distractions that often threaten to derail me at the beginning this morning. Watching hilarious videos, searching the Internet for juicy news, watching mindless television shows that get in the way of conversation with my wife.

What are the distractions that keep you from your “great work”?

Can you put your finger on your “great work”?

If you have determined what is your “great work,” then when distractions arise, you can do exactly what Nehemiah did and refuse them - *“I cannot come down. I am doing a GREAT WORK!”*

Opposition need not stop the work of God! Nehemiah chapter four dealt with nothing but problems, yet still the work continued.

For us, too, the various oppositions we may face in our attempts to fulfill the GREAT COMMANDMENT, the NEW COMMANDMENT and the GREAT COMMISSION need not derail us - as long as we stay focused on the Lord.

God has called us to a GREAT work!

But, God’s call to you and me is to be prepared to rise above opposition. Remember the Lord who is great and awesome, and fight the good fight!

It is time to **STAND FIRM** against ridicule, against temptations to quit mid-course, and against distractions. It is time to start a **REVOLUTION** and put our hands to the good work - praying like crazy, loving each other as Jesus loved us and sharing Jesus with our friends.