Facing Challenges Together

# Scriptures: Nehemiah 4, 5

# Key Thought: We are encouraged by Nehemiah’s example of meeting challenges.

# Intro:

## God has planned for our growth.

In fact he commands us in Peter’s writings to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Pe 3:18). Jesus is also looking for the growth of his church. He encouraged his disciples to recruit more disciples (Mt 28:19,20). Jesus predicted that the group of his followers would grow like a tree (Mt. 13:31,32).

## Yet neither of these processes, our personal growth, nor church growth, seem to go smoothly and without a great deal of trouble. Why is that?

The reason is simple. The Bible tells us that we live in the middle of the spiritual conflict. In explaining his parable of the sower, Jesus spoke about an enemy, Satan, who snatches the life-giving word of God out of our life whenever he has the chance (Mark 4:15, Mt 13:19). Jesus compared the kingdom to a field of wheat where an enemy had sowed weeds among the good seeds (Mt. 13:25, 26).

Paul compares our spiritual journey to a wrestling match, telling us that we “wrestle not against flesh and blood but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against the spiritual wickedness in high places. ” (Eph. 6:12 KJV). Peter said, “Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.” 1 Pe 5:8 NIV.

So it’s no wonder that our personal spiritual journey is not easy, that it often seems like one step forward and two steps back. It’s no wonder that the church of Jesus Christ struggles to just maintain itself let alone grow.

## Since this is the situation, it would be good for us to be aware of the enemy’s tactics against us and be prepared to meet them. This is where the story of Nehemiah comes in.

Nehemiah was a leader of Israel at a key time in Israel’s history when God was bringing to pass his promise to restore his people Israel to their land after the time of exile in Babylon. Previous leaders Zerubbabel and Ezra had led groups of exiles back to Jerusalem. But Nehemiah, who was a devout Jew in exile, serving as cup-bearer to the Persian King, heard that the city of Jerusalem was still in rough shape, and with broken down walls, very vulnerable to surrounding enemies.

This saddened him greatly. He made it a matter of prayer; then he asked the King for permission to return to Jerusalem and rebuild its walls. To his surprise, in answer to prayer, the Persian king granted his request and gave him aid in the project as well. But it still would not be easy. And that is what we found when we read chapter 4. There was opposition. The kind of opposition that Nehemiah experienced is illustrative for us of the kinds of obstacles that we meet in our lives.

How Nehemiah overcame his obstacles serves as a great example for us and how to overcome the similar obstacles that face us as well.

# Derision

## Nehemiah ridiculed

The first type of obstacle that Nehemiah faced was derision, or ridicule. His enemies, leaders of neighboring areas, whose names were Sanballat and Tobiah made fun of the work being done. Tobiah said in verse three, “What they are building – even a fox climbing up on it would break down their wall of stones!” His enemies doubted the Jew’s ability. They doubted their timing. They mocked their efforts. Have you ever had that happen to you? It hurts doesn’t it!

## Derision is much used today.

The other night I was watching a Boston Red Sox and Yankees game. The Yankees pitcher was their Japanese ace starter, Tanaka. The announcer reported that Tanaka had told his countrymen, the Boston Red Sox closer, Koji Uehara, not even to bother putting on his spikes, because he was not going to get to play. I was gleefully satisfied when Napoli smacked a home run to break a tie and Uehara was called in to preserve the win for Boston with another perfect ninth inning.

But often derision is very discouraging and disheartening. Many people’s lives have been completely derailed, even destroyed, by the lighthearted ridicule of family and friends. Often times the jokers did not mean their jesting to be taken as seriously as the person who was the brunt of their joking felt it. But that’s the way it often works.

But things went differently with the courageous and faith-filled Nehemiah.

## Nehemiah’s way to overcome

Nehemiah strategy for overcoming the derision of his enemies was twofold.

1. First, in verse four, he breathed the prayer of dependence upon God.” Hear us, our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads…. They have thrown insults in the face of the builders.”
2. Second he encouraged the people to renew their commitment to the building. It says in verse six that “The people worked with all their heart.”

Jesus’ disciples made the same two responses to discouraging situations and threats against them recorded in Acts chapter 4. They prayed to God and asked God to consider the threats against them, and to enable them to speak out boldly. Rather than stepping back, or proceeding cautiously, they renewed their commitment to the work they were doing.

# Discouragement

## 2nd obstacle

There was another great obstacle to progress for Nehemiah and those who were working with him. They were discouraged. The discouragement came not simply from the ridicule of Sanballat and Tobiah, but from the circumstances around them. The task that they had attempted was huge. Even though people had returned to Jerusalem a few years before, the piles of rubble from the destruction of the city were still high and had hardly been touched (v. 2). Those living there were simply surviving amid the ruins. There was a feeling of being alone in the work. Nehemiah says the work was so spread out because the city was large compared to the number of people and the number of workers (v. 19). The heavy work, building walls and moving stones took a physical toll on the workers (v. 10). A pessimistic attitude had set in concerning the likelihood of an attack by the enemies around (v. 12). There certainly were a bunch of bad circumstances that Nehemiah and his people faced, weren’t there!

Circumstances are often a part of the discouragement in our lives too, aren’t they? And usually when we get discouraged, we can list a number of things that are against us. How do we handle times like that in our lives?

## Nehemiah’s strategy against discouragement

Again, Nehemiah had a twofold strategy for dealing with discouragement.

1. Nehemiah kept his eyes open for the vulnerable spots along the wall. He posted guards there v. 13). Now, psychologically, this is an important part of our strategy for overcoming discouragement. The opposite, which is what we often do, is hide our head in the sand, generalize, and assume that everything is against us. By doing this, we are not able to effectively defend ourselves in the specific areas where we are weak and prone to discouragement. Nehemiah, on the other hand, wanted to have his eyes wide open, and know exactly where his vulnerabilities were. That way, he could be careful to defend in those places.

For example: Suppose I’m sensitive about the car I drive or the clothes I wear. If I am aware of my sensitivity in that area, I keep my car clean, or try to dress as carefully and neatly as I can so that I do not get negative comments in an area which I am sensitive about.

Spiritually, if I know I have a weakness for gambling, I don’t go to events at Mohegan Sun. If I know I have tendency to neglect my Bible, I set some definitely goals for Bible reading or join a Bible study group. I set a specific strategy to strengthen myself in my vulnerable area.

1. Nehemiah’s second strategy, another one that is so helpful for us, was to look for and be aware of God’s presence with him (v. 14). He encouraged those who were with him not to allow their focus to be on the enemy. Instead he said to them, “Don’t be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome!”

John Patton, an early missionary to the New Hebrides Islands told how the presence of God was especially near him in moments of despair. He was being pursued to be killed. But he climbed a tree and hid in the foliage. He wrote, “I sat there among the branches safe in the arms of Jesus. Never in all my sorrows did my Lord draw nearer to me and speak more soothingly to my soul than when the moon light flickered among those leaves, and the night air played on my throbbing brow, as I told all my heart to Jesus.” He focused on God’s presence, and by God’s grace, his pursuers did not find him.

John Wesley, founder of Methodism, said on his deathbed, “The best of all is God is with us!”

What a difference it makes in our lives when we get our eyes and minds off from the things that discourage us and onto the presence of God in our lives. The Bible says, “Fix your thoughts on Jesus the author and finisher of your faith.” (Heb. 12:2)

# Division

## 3rd obstacle

As if derision and discouragement were not enough of a problem, Nehemiah faced a third obstacle. Among the Israelites of his day, there was division. This is recorded in chapter 5. There were complaints about the interest being charged by lenders. Mosaic law forbid Israelites to charge interest to other Israelites. But in Nehemiah’s case, there was a conflict between as some were doing that.

But isn’t it true that conflict of personal interest is always a strategy of the devil that hinders the growth of God’s work. Even today, good Christian brothers and sisters protecting their personal rights, or unconsciously seeking to control this or that can cause division.

When we here at Copper Hill Church inherited the Ken Seymour estate gift, one of our prayers immediately was that God would keep us United. I am thankful that so far we have allowed him to do that and I pray that you will join me in continuing to pray for our unity in the months and years ahead.

Nehemiah overcame the divisions among the people by calling them back to God’s standard for them and asking lenders of his day to make restitution to those they had wronged. They had to be willing to forgo a personal benefit for the benefit of all. Often it is true that unity can only be maintained when some are willing to forgo a personal benefit or preference for the good of others.

Jesus urged us to adopt what I call second mile Christianity. If we feel like duty calls us to go 1 mile, don’t be afraid to go the extra mile out of love! That was Jesus’ way.

## Summary of 2 strategies against division

1. Prayer for unity – That was Jesus’ prayer for his church in John 17 – “that they may be one..”
2. Placing the good of others above our own.

# Diversion

## Previous leaders had been diverted from their task

The last of the obstacles that we find in Nehemiah’s history was diversion. Again this is recorded in chapter 5. This had been illustrated in the mistakes of previous governors of the people of Israel. Bible records in Nehemiah 5:15 tell us that previous leaders had taken advantage of the power to tax by amassing wealth through it. But in contrast Nehemiah maintains his integrity and his focus. He did not allow his attention to be diverted from the task. He says, “I devoted myself to the work on this wall. All my men were assembled there for the work; we did not acquire any land.”(5:16) What is he saying? He’s saying that it’s easy when you are in charge to allow the perks of being in charge to distract you from the main task. But he was careful not to do that.

I submit to you friends that here in the United States were God has blessed us as Christians above and beyond all Christians in history, that it is very easy to allow the perks of being a Christian in the 21st century United States to distract us from the main task – building God’s kingdom – loving and serving God, loving and serving others, and making disciples for Jesus.

We have more diversions from the main thing that anyone in history. Just the media that we have available to us, is enough to divert us and keep us busy for hours and hours every day. Most of us in this era are struggling with some version of the question, “How much time do I spend on which media?” There are more sports to watch, to pursue, to take your children to, and to attend than ever before in history. And there are more of them all the time. We drive fast cars so we can get places and back quickly. But are we home more as a result? I doubt it. We go more places, more often and farther away.

## What’s Nehemiah solution to keep us from being diverted

1. He tells us that reverence for God was what kept him focused. Paul tells us to “perfect holiness out of reverence for God” (2 Cor 7:1) What is holiness? One key aspect of it is fixing our thoughts and our hearts on God’s plan for our lives.
2. Secondly Nehemiah recommends single-mindedness. Like putting blinders on a horse so they can only look straight ahead, God wants us to keep our attention on the main thing. If we dissipate our energy in all kinds of endeavors, we will probably not be good at anything. That’s just practical advice. The more exceptional we seek to be in any one area, the more focus we will need to give to it.

Ill. I am aware of at least three cases of building programs and churches, where God led a man who was at or near retirement to use his first years of retirement to oversee the church building project. In a couple cases, the person retired early in order to do so. That is an outstanding example of someone who maintained the focus of doing God’s work and not being distracted at a time when in our culture today, it is very easy to be distracted. The solution to a distracted life is increased focus.

# Conclusion

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| Learning from Nehemiah | |
| Satan’s Tactics | **Recommended Counter Strategies** |
| Derision | 1. Prayer of dependence upon God 2. Renewed commitment |
| Discouragement | 1. Eyes open for vulnerabilities 2. Awareness of God’s presence |
| Division | 1. Prayer for unity 2. Place the good of others above our own |
| Diversion | 1. Focus on God first 2. Be more single-focused |

## Silent Meditation Questions:

1. Which of these challenges am I facing?
2. What attitude change could God use to make me victorious?
3. What decisions do I need to make to meet my challenges?