

Motivation in Tough Times

Nehemiah 2:11-20; 4:1-23

Adversity comes to us all. What we do with it determines what kind of person we become. Adversity can make or break us. The thing about adversity is that some while in it see only their weaknesses while others can reach deep inside and rise to the occasion even to the point of leading others through it. What makes the difference? I believe the difference is one relies on self and the other relies on their reservoir of faith. If your reservoir is empty this morning, perhaps we can find encouragement through a seasoned leader to replenish it. I'm speaking of Nehemiah.

In 444 B.C. the city walls of Jerusalem were in ruins and the gates of the city were burned. The smoke of destruction had long dissipated, but the people were still in great distress.

In 1940 London's homes, businesses and churches were in ruins and the black smoke blocked out the sun. Despair had taken the heart out of the people, and now Hitler was closing in on Great Britain.

Isn't it interesting that more than 2,000 years apart - two men, Nehemiah and Winston Churchill are two great leaders that reached deep within to find the motivation to say, "Give me the tools, and we will finish the job!" At times like this, a mere speech can have a great impact on an army. Words may only be ink on paper, but they can find their way into fearful hearers and liberate the dejected soul! When encouraged men unite and become a tenacious and formidable force that brings victory!

We can go from despair to triumph...that's God's message through Nehemiah this morning. Our families need someone in touch with a great God to lead us through the tough times.

I'm want to through a couple of chapters in Nehemiah and highlight some of the principles that show us Nehemiah was a great example.

Background – Nehemiah was in captivity in Babylon; he heard of the hardship and ruin of Jerusalem's walls/gates.

Nehemiah asks to be allowed to go repair them; given permission and resources. We take up the story when he arrives. Neh. 2:11-20

V.11 Why did Nehemiah wait 3 days before doing anything? No luncheons with city officials, no press conference, no guided tours...just silence. When faced with a big task, solitude in Jehovah is where our reservoir of faith gets refilled! Have you ever acted in haste or spoken too soon because you didn't quit yourself before God first?

V. 12-16 Why tour the walls at night? He wanted an honest appraisal of the damage without a bunch of people tagging along telling him it was impossible. Men of influence walk with their eyes open, looking at the problem with virgin eyes. Ostriches don't make good leaders. Take ownership of the problem. These 3 days of silence was when God put the plans in Nehemiah's heart.

Why the wall? Why wasn't he concerned about their housing conditions? Because the wall was Jerusalem's main defense against their enemies, and they were vulnerable.

V. 13-15 Nehemiah's path led him through the Kidron valley or Valley of Hinnom. This is where refuse was dumped, and the smelly fires smoldered constantly; it became known as the Refuse or Dung Gate. I don't know about you, but my eyes perk up and notice the man who is willing to walk through the worst, smelliest valley to forge the thoughts of revival! Notice not even his mount could make it through all the debris, and he did it without an audience to boast to. Notice he walked around the entire wall; he began and ended at the Valley Gate.

V. 17 After the midnight tour in solitude, Nehemiah emerges to commit himself to the people to protect their homeland. ("us") People will follow leaders that roll up their sleeves to join in on the hard task. When Churchill addressed the House of Commons during the war, he said, "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat." Notice Nehemiah's only motivation was ***"to remove the reproach of Jerusalem."***

V. 18 The majority met the challenge with enthusiasm...but it was also accompanied with criticism.

V. 19 The criticism came from within. Opposition often comes from those who like things the way they are...but growth often means that changes are in order...having to move out of our comfort zone.

V. 20 How does one account for Nehemiah's boldness? He's not a weakling...he knows God fights with them!

So, Nehemiah has an iron constitution...inexhaustible energy...total concentration...and complete faith in a powerful God. Are there those in your family and others whom you influence, when tough times come, they can give up because of the size of the task? God can use you to fortify their walls..... but you must first fortify your OWN spiritual walls! I encourage you to undertake something that is difficult!

There's a cost in being a leader, and one of those costs is receiving criticism. In chapter 4:1-9 Sanballat and Tobiah not only criticize, but they stir up others to join in.

Why was Sanballat, Tobiah and the wealthy men of Samaria against the rebuilding of Jerusalem? One of the main roads linking the Tigris-Euphrates river valley with Philistia and Egypt went right through Jerusalem. With Jerusalem again well-protected, it would attract trade and Samaria's trade would be hurt deeply. Nehemiah is in a battle!

We all have a Sanballat in our life. Constantly critical of us. Notice how Nehemiah reacts to him in chapter 4:4-5 He keeps his cool and talks to God! When you feel revenge welling up inside toward your enemies, it's best to leave it to God to execute! Don't retaliate – pray!

Instead of striking out at Sanballat, Nehemiah just went to work doing what God told him to do. After getting off his knees with renewed strength, he pumped some of that determination into his workers. "Pass me another brick!" Notice the intensity of the reaction this caused in Sanballat: 4:7-8. Nothing riles a critic more than having their criticism result in more progress!

Did Nehemiah let this distract him? No. In chapter 4:9 he matched the intensity of the criticism with intensified prayer; but this time he brought the workers with him when he knelt before God!

If you're going to be a person of influence, you're going to get criticism. Your instant reaction needs to be falling on your knees in prayer. But prayer isn't the only thing we do...we need to buckle down and finish the task at hand! No man who takes on doing a difficult task and does it to the best of his ability ever loses self-respect!

In Neh. 4:10-12 Nehemiah faces another problem. When strength is waning and burnout is rampant among your workers, work comes to a standstill. Imagine the self-talk that was going on in their minds...an impossible, exhausting task with the threat of enemies. In these kinds of situations, a leader needs to keep his own thoughts in check and a faith in God bigger than the problem!

Let's look at Nehemiah's action plan in this crisis: 4:13-23. His insight is fantastic. He saw the basic unit of encouragement is the family. They had been broken up by working in different places on the wall, so the scattered family was counterproductive. So, he reorganized the work around the family with a common goal.

V.14 When he saw their fear, he knew he had to act fast. The look of fear is quite recognizable; it spreads like wildfire. Until he changed this element, no progress would be made. There's no greater way to push back fear than to point their attention to an Almighty God...and to rally them to defend their own family!

V.15 When you've done all you can do, and the problem still exists...don't give in yet...leave room for God to work! God can do something in the enemy's camp that we would never be able to succeed in doing! Not only does God encourage our hearts, but He also frustrates the plans of our enemies!

What was the result of Nehemiah's insights and encouragement? **4:16-18**. When discouraged, it's easy to see only one view at a time instead of the whole picture.

A person of influence can stick to the battle plan and not be distracted by the small things! Nehemiah had a plan that gave them peace of mind while allowing the work to go on!

Nehemiah had more strategies up his sleeve: 4:19-20. To stop fear, it takes encouragement to restore confidence and keep things on track. Nehemiah provided them a rallying point in the event of an attack and reminded them God was fighting with them!

Now for his final strategy: 4:21-23. He created a protective buddy system. A wise leader gets people involved in helping one another...it boosts morale and creates confidence so the project can be completed. We all need someone who will drop what they are doing and come running when we need help!

Conclusion

I think we begin our walk with Christ with confidence and faith. We go after Moby Dick with a row boat, a harpoon and a jar of tartar sauce! But it doesn't take long to start feeling the row boat is swamping and the waves of intimidation come crashing down upon us!

Perhaps it would be good for all of us to stop and take inventory...lest we find ourselves opting to stay on the shore instead of joining the hunt for Moby Dick! In small groups, let's share our responses with one another to these questions.

Are you in the middle of a situation and in danger of not finishing? How do you encourage someone who is feeling overwhelmed at the task before them? What can you do to rally when you find yourself worn out?

We need to remember where all strength comes from. Nehemiah lived before Jesus came. He put his trust in God. We too need to remember, ***“I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.”*** Phil 4:13