

Nehemiah's calling to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem in the 5th Century BC underlines two principles:

[i] You cannot please everybody, so don't waste time trying, and

[ii] Decisive action divides people as often as it unites them.

People who cannot accept these principles will continue to battle with their problems and cannot qualify as effective leaders in any great work for God.

1 THE CHALLENGE TO THE WORK [4:1-6]

Sanballot [Haronite 2:10] was "disturbed" by the fact that someone had come to Jerusalem "to seek the welfare of the children of Israel". His comfort zone had been invaded and his ungodly behaviour [raiding Jerusalem] was exposed and threatened. Sanballot was "angry with great indignation" when he heard of the proposal to rebuild the walls of the city and restore the gates. Anger showed itself initially in criticism. His racial prejudice was evident when he "mocked the Jews", [whom he had also "scorned and accused", 2:19], along with Tobiah [Ammonite] and Geshem [Arab]; a tricky triumvirate. Sanballot boasted before the Samaritans and others [4:2]. "Will feeble Jews fortify [restore], sacrifice, finish quickly [in a day]", reviving the rubbish? There was no argument; only scorn based on anger, and anger is only one letter short of danger. Tobiah [Ammonite 2:10.19] joked at the workers' expense. "Even a fox would crumble their wall" [4:3].

Nehemiah's response was twofold [4:4-5].

[i] *He prayed as at other times of crisis.* When first he heard of the ruin of Jerusalem he prayed for four months before approaching the Persian king for help! [1:4-11]. Confronted with the king's interrogation, "why so sad? "What do you want? When will you return?" Nehemiah "prayed and answered the king" [2:4]. Now he prays about the challenge to the work on site in Jerusalem speaking to God whom, he knows by covenant. "Hear us our God...we are despised...turn their insults back on their head...let them experience exile [as we have]..." [4:4]. He asks for judgement from the mover and shaker of all things; the Living God. "Do not cover their guilt or blot out their sin from your sight" [4:5] This pre-Christian prayer asks god to remember the sins of Nehemiah's enemies because this man's concern is for the greater glory of God expressed in obedience to his call to rebuild the walls. Nehemiah was concerned that the enemies had "provoked anger in the builders"; a dangerous state of mind which might cause them to lose concentration and hope.

[ii] *He progressed the work* [4:6].

"We built the wall to half the height" providing some protection behind which to continue the good work to which God had called them. "The people had a mind to work". It is amazing what can be achieved when we put our mind to it.

2 THE CONSPIRACY OF THE ENEMY [4:7-14]

[i] There was provocation without [4:7-8,11]

Sanballot from Samaria in the north, Tobiah from Ammon in the east, Arabs [2:19] from the south were joined by men of Ashdod in the west in an axis of evil aimed at preventing the rebuilding of the walls and the fulfilment of the will of God. There's was a hopeless case. They were "very angry" over this challenge to their marauding attacks on the defenceless city. Angry people are dangerous people, for anger either dissipates energy and makes progress impossible, or it consolidates effort and guarantees success. This unlikely coalition "plotted together [conspired] to fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it" [4:8]. Verbal abuse and slander failed to discourage the workers, so the conspirators stepped up the attack. They schemed to infiltrate the workers, kill them, and end the work [4:11].

[ii] There was panic within [4:10,12]

This was worse than provocation and deadly in its effect. Soon the workers were saying that the job was too big for them. "Our strength is running out. There is too much rubble. We are not able to build" [4:10]. Defeat was in sight. The workers considered that the enemy were too great [4:12]. Jews living on the edge

of the city felt most vulnerable and came to Nehemiah on ten occasions, saying “they will attack us from every side”.

Nehemiah’s response was threefold.

[i] There was consecration [4:9a]

As fear and hopelessness is deadly, so consecration is uplifting and strengthening. As before, Nehemiah testifies to prayer being the first step in overcoming barriers and turning defeat into success. “We prayed to our [covenant] God”; the One whom we know and trust as Creator and sustainer of his people. The One who heals all our diseases and overcomes our enemies [4:9a; 1:4-11; 2:4; 4:4].

[ii] There was commitment [4:9b]

Like the World War One chaplain who taught his men to ‘trust the Lord and pass the ammunition’, Nehemiah responded practically. “We posted a guard day and night.” These men were stationed in the lowest parts of the wall; that is, where the city was most vulnerable, to provide a show of strength and provide maximum protection. They were armed with “swords, spears and bows”, the latest weaponry [4:13]. They were arranged in family groupings allowing for ease of identification, true appreciation of strengths and weaknesses and bonds of love which are stronger than death. Simple effective fighting units reflect the principle that we can achieve together in fellowship what individuals and small groups cannot achieve.

[iii] There was challenge [4:14]

Nehemiah recorded that he “looked things over” as at other times [2:11-15]. He set the vision and offered encouragement to leaders and workers. ‘Small minds discuss events. Great minds discuss ideas.’ [Eleanor Roosevelt]. Nehemiah lifted their focus off the problem onto the Lord. A great idea when faced with illness, financial difficulty, relational problems or any distress!

“Don’t be afraid of them.”

“Remember the Lord who is great and awesome.”

“Fight for your families and homes.” [2 Samuel 10:12] This is a valid, vital call to battle when survival, not aggression is involved.

3 THE COMPLETION OF THE WALL [4:15-23]

The conspiracy failed when the plot was exposed and the conspirators, who had no vision of, or calling from the Lord became discouraged. They never came against Jerusalem and its working warriors. Work on the wall progressed by prayer and preparation, both of which require hard work and genuine commitment. “From that time...” they learned as they went and were willing to accept changes which ensured success. No work for God can develop without appreciation of these principles.

Nehemiah’s strategy for success was simple. Half the people worked on the wall and half were on guard. Workers were armed [4:17-18] while they worked in the daylight hours and they took turns with the home guard [‘Dad’s Army 4:22] at night. Guards were armed with spears and bows for offensive warfare and shields and armour for defence [4:16, 13]. They stood their ground from “dawn until dusk” [4:21 under the guidance of section leaders 4:16b-17a].

Distinctive leadership was given by Nehemiah who stood by the wall with a trumpeter [4:18b]. Workers spread out around the wall [4:19] were told to stay alert for the sound of the trumpet. When you “hear the trumpet, join us there” [4:20]. Good strategy was undergirded by great and awesome provision from heaven. “Our God will fight for us”. This is the same covenant promise issued by Moses and Joshua in earlier days. [Exodus 14:14, 25; Joshua 23:10].

Lifestyle changed under duress. The people never undressed, which must have pleased the sellers of deodorants, but upset the makers of pyjamas! The people never disarmed even when they went to drink water [4:23]. They were watching and ready like Gideon’s chosen few in the former days of settlement in the land. Clear servant leadership, careful delegation of responsibility and absolute faith in God overcame every problem and led to the fulfilment of God’s purposes for his people at this time. What ever load you are carrying today can be dealt with in the same way. Answer the Gospel call by coming in faith to God’s Son Jesus, the Risen Lord and trust in the fact that “our God will fight for us”. This offer is valid for every disease, difficulty and distress. Don’t put off your response. Act now!