

October 9

## Nehemiah 4-6

Chapter 4, verse 9 says, "But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night". In those words we find a delicate balance, one that sometimes Christians lose sight of. On the one hand, we must always recognize that we are totally dependent upon the Lord and upon Him alone for security and protection. Those who rely upon the arm of the flesh will fall. This is what Christians believe. On the other hand, we must ourselves exercise great vigilance and be prepared to work very hard, to be the instruments through which God's work is accomplished here on earth.

There is a version of Christianity which exposes almost total passivity. Just pray about things, it would say, and then let go and see what God will do. There is little for us to do, but we must exercise radical reliance upon God. At the other end of the spectrum, there are some activists who have little time for those who want to pray. Just get out and do whatever it is that you think is right and God will bless it. It's all up to us. Nehemiah was somewhere in the middle. He believed in fervent prayer but he was certainly an activist as well. The New Testament emphasizes the same balance with its repeated injunctions to us to "watch and pray". Both activities are necessary if we are to keep our balance in the challenging world in which we have been called to live.

Nehemiah knew how to deal with opposition. Notice in this passage that there was external opposition -- skeptical taunts and threat from Sanballat and Tobiah. There were threats of attack as well. Nehemiah was obviously not passive. He was ready, willing and able to fight if necessary, to protect his city and his people but if fighting is what it came to, the battle would be waged in total dependence upon the strength of the Lord. He created plans to BOTH protect the city AND build the wall. This bolstered the confidence of the people, gave them security and accomplished the work.

The most well-known part of the story we read today is the picture of Nehemiah being summoned by messengers from Sanballat to a meeting arranged by Sanballat to discuss the state of affairs between them. The answer that he gave to the summons is classic, "I am carrying on a great work and cannot go down." When we are absolutely certain that we are doing exactly what God wants us to do, we can afford to be focused and very stubborn about what we will and will not do. Everyone has a suggestion and an agenda. It is important that you and I find out what God wants us to do and then not allow ourselves to be distracted by anything else. If God has called you to a "great work" and you know it, stay on that wall and do not come down for anyone.

But more insidious than the external opposition is the internal opposition. The people got tired. And when you add threats and skepticism to fatigue, you get complaining. Sometimes rank-and-file workers only see the problem ahead of them, not the preferred future, not the vision realized. So they slow down. Nehemiah encourages them with

the idea of security and God's blessing. He keeps them focused on this single task that is both urgent and important.

The degree to which Nehemiah was focused is evident from the fact the job was completed in just 52 days. Given the importance which Nehemiah attached to his task, it comes as a surprise that right in the midst of the 52 days, Nehemiah stopped the work and called for a general assembly to address the issue of economic reforms. The injustice of charging usury and taking advantage of fellow Jews by charging exorbitant interest rates was causing tremendous hardship among the poorer people of Jerusalem. Some had sacrificed their land and homes to the rich money lenders and some had resorted to selling their children into slavery in order to ensure their survival. The terrible injustice became known to Nehemiah in the context of the building process and he stopped right then and there to deal with it as soon as possible.

Nehemiah put an end to the practice of usury. The practice of lending money at interest and holding collateral against the possibility of default may be at the heart of what you and I call capitalism, but it is not a practice that gets much in the way of approval in scripture. The idea of investment and interest on money invested is not by itself unbiblical. However, when unfair rates of interest are involved or when the lender has the borrower at a disadvantage and uses his leverage to unfairly treat the borrower, then God's ire is roused. As Christians, it is important for us to carefully think through this issue. If a fellow believer is in trouble and asks for a loan, there is a great deal in scripture to discourage us from giving a loan for which we hold precious collateral and charge interest. Consider the possibility of a freely given gift rather than a contract that could make for great trouble in the case of default.

Nehemiah's concern for justice carried over into every part of his life and administration. As the governor of Jerusalem, he was entitled to certain perks. He put away a long standing practice which required the people to provide food and wine worth 40 shekels of silver as his daily allotment. He chose not to exercise his right. God's choice servants sometimes will, decide to lay aside his rights in order to be a better servant to the people of God. Such a leader was Nehemiah!

This is what leaders do: they press through opposition. They motivate people. They love getting things done. They stand up to bullies in their own community. They do it for the common good and not for personal gain.

I pray that all our leaders become like Nehemiah, myself included. May God give us grace to accomplish his purposes!