

## Failing Strength

Nehemiah 4:7-23

One of the chief temptations common to man is to give up. It's just too difficult. I just can't do it. So we quit. Somewhere along the line, somehow, when I was young, I was instilled with the sense of the value of not giving up—the virtue of perseverance. Steadfastness. Endurance. Patience. That is a virtue that the Bible speaks about often. In some familiar passages.

James 1:2 My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. 4 But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing."

Or, Rom.5:3 And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; 4 and perseverance, character; and character, hope."

And also,

2 Peter 1:5 "But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, 6 to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, 7 to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love."

So perseverance, steadfastness, is a necessary link in the path to godliness, and ultimately to love! Perseverance is an essential link in the pursuit of character and spiritual maturity. You just can't expect those things without the grace of perseverance. But let me ask the obvious question, "How do you develop perseverance?" How do you get it? And the answer is, through difficulty. Through hardship. In various trials, as James describes it. In tribulation, as Paul defines it.

The people of Israel had just such an occasion to learn

perseverance in our text this afternoon. For the situation was hard. And their strength was failing.

v.10

Let's look first at the reason for that, the reason their strength was so limited. It's because of their enemies.

v.7-8

As we begin, let me state the obvious.

### **I. ENEMIES WILL ALWAYS BE PRESENT TO FIGHT AGAINST THE KINGDOM OF GOD.**

They will always be there. With good reason, says Jesus.

John 15:18 "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. 19 If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you."

Now, Nehemiah is in the OT; we're still dealing with the people of God in the Old Covenant, but the principle is exactly the same. God has chosen his people out of the world, therefore the world will hate them. The enemies will always be there. And the arch-enemy will always be there, the one described as a roaring lion. And so Peter says,

1Pe 5:8 "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour."

That advice is timeless, isn't it? Be sober. Be vigilant. On guard, alert, awake, conscious of your surroundings, watching for enemies. For they will come. And notice what we learn in Nehemiah 4 about the motivation for those attacks by the enemies. What is the nature of their hearts? In a word, anger. To put it in general terms,

## **A. Anger is at the root of much opposition to the kingdom of God.**

Anger is such a damaging emotion. It is such a dangerous experience. Surely there is such a thing as righteous anger, that anger which is under full control and focused solely upon that which is wicked. But I'm not talking about righteous anger here. Rather, I'm talking about the much more common form of anger. The anger of ill-will toward someone else. The anger of insecurity when you are threatened by someone else. The anger of being challenged in your own authority. The anger of realizing that your favored position may be in jeopardy or your prominence may be diminished. Such was the anger Nehemiah faced.

v.7

They were angry because the gaps in the wall were being closed. They were, perhaps, angry at the Jews for being so hasty to push the work forward and angry at themselves for being so slow in opposing it. It was a fierce anger and a cruel wrath. Their derision and taunts were of no avail. Nehemiah and his workers were adamant to continue to work and to complete the project. Mocking the Jews didn't stop them, so now they would just become angry at them.

It's good to recognize anger when you see it in others, it's necessary to recognize it if you want to respond appropriately. There is such common sense wisdom in,

Pr 22:24 "Make no friendship with an angry man, And with a furious man do not go."

But many people do try to make such friendships. They try to appease anger, because in their insecurity, they want to please men and obtain their approval. So they seek to please the angry man to win his approval. And they are doomed to failure, because, in the words of,

Pr 27:4 "Wrath is cruel, anger is overwhelming..."

And, Pr 30:33 "For as the churning of milk produces butter, And wringing the nose produces blood, So the forcing of wrath produces strife."

Sometimes it is necessary to simply come to terms with the fact that you will have enemies, and they will be angry. Now, as I've said before, I don't like to make people angry, and I don't go out of my way to do it. In other words, I don't seek to provoke anger in others. But sometimes, all too often, doing what is right and godly will, in itself, provoke that anger. And so it is very useful to understand that anger is at the root of much opposition to the kingdom of God.

Anger is the driving force behind those who would become your enemies, enemies of the gospel and enemies of the church. And if you wish to become wise, and if you wish to know how to resist the assaults of your enemies, this is where you have to begin. Understand the root of their heart. Understand their anger. And realize what that anger will cause them to do, namely form conspiracies. To be sure,

## **B. Conspiracy is the form of much opposition to the kingdom of God.**

Conspiracy—groups of the wicked joining forces in common opposition to you and to me, in opposition to the kingdom of God. The example here is striking,

v.8

Remember who they were, from verse 7, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the Ashdodites. The Arabs were the southern neighbors to the Jews. The Ammonites were to the east, the Ashdodites to the west. And Sanballat the Samaritan was from

their neighbors to the north. So neighbors on all four sides gathered together and joined forces against the advance of the kingdom of God under the leadership of Nehemiah. It was a grave situation, indeed. Judah would be totally isolated.

Hatred of God and opposition to his kingdom will provoke such unusual conspiracies, and such hatred surely makes strange bedfellows. The most prominent NT example of such an unthinkable conspiracy was the Jewish King Herod the Great and the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, who conspired to have Jesus put to death. We read in,

Luke 23:12 “And Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day, for before this they had been at enmity with each other.”

That conspiracy would trouble the church after Pentecost as well. Peter and John say this in,

Act 4:27 “For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together.”

Conspiracy is a tool of God’s enemies, and it is a tool of Satan. In the specific circumstances of Nehemiah 4, it was a military conspiracy, the conspiracy of an ambush. They would sneak into the city and kill the workers before they notice the attack. The Jews who live near the border witnessed their preparation for the attack on Jerusalem.

v.11

They expected it to work. They expected to put an end to the work done on the wall of Jerusalem, which was the work of God’s kingdom. So it is with God’s enemies today. They expect their conspiracy to succeed. But, of course, it won’t. The church shall prevail, and we have Jesus’ own promise to assure us of that.

However, that promise doesn’t remove our responsibility to fight. The promise of success gives us no room to sit back and be passive, for we can surely lose many skirmishes along the way. And we do. We have. We need to be ready to fight.

## **II. GOD’S PEOPLE MUST BE READY TO FIGHT FOR HIS KINGDOM.**

Such a good example before us.

v.9

They prayed to God. Don’t miss that. It’s not the focus of my sermon today, but it is very much the context. They prayed to God. But at the same time they put out a watch that they might not be trapped unawares by the enemies. They were to pray, and we must pray. It is an absolute essential. It is absolutely necessary. We must pray for the kingdom of God. And we must fight.

Prayer is not presented to us as a passive thing, but the very essence of true Christian activism. In describing and defining that armor of God in Ephesians 6, Paul ends by saying to that church that had become so dear to him, that they should be praying always, but in so doing they were also to gird their waist with the truth, to put on the breastplate of righteousness, to shod their feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace, and to take the shield of faith with which they would be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. They were to take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit.

They were to fight. And so we sing that battle song, “Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war. With the cross of Jesus going on before. Christ the royal master leads against the foe. Forward into battle, see his banner go. “Like a mighty army moves the church of God. Brothers, we are treading where the saints have trod.”

Now, despite the fact that many modernized church hymnals have removed that hymn with its dominant military overtones, it is still the proper perspective that we are to have when it comes to the work of the kingdom of God today. “Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war.” We are to pray. And we are to fight. And,

**A. Fighting requires vigilance.**

Constant and unending vigilance. The Israelites were very much alert. They established a watch around the clock.

v.9

Let me stop and make some specific applications at this point. Think of these things not in the literal, physical circumstances of the battles Nehemiah faced, but think of them in the context of the spiritual battles that you face. And that I face. The battles faced by our church. What does it mean for us to “set a watch?”

It means to set a guard, to always be alert, that we are constantly on-guard, first of all with regard to our doctrine. Constantly searching the Scriptures, to learn more, and to know more. Constantly on-guard that we are not accepting the untruths of this modern world, all dressed up with Christian terminology. It’s hard. It takes constant work, and a willingness to think. A willingness to study. A willingness sometimes, often perhaps, to go against the flow and to go contrary to the prevailing spirit.

Indeed, in issues of doctrine and biblical truth, a large part of my responsibility as an elder is defined as one,

Titus 1:9 “...holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict.”

Be on guard. And what a terrible danger it is when we lose

that sense of vigilance. And I must say, this is one of the areas of strength within the OPC, and one of the things I greatly appreciate about our denomination. There is, most often, this sense of doctrinal vigilance. But we must also be vigilant in regard to our lives. Making sure that the way we live conforms to God’s law. We need to be vigilant in studying the law, especially the ten commandments, to see what duties are required of us. Not at all as a means of salvation, but as a demonstration of loving obedience to God. And may the doctrines of grace never, never encourage us to be lax in the personal examination of our own lives.

Fighting requires vigilance, to identify where and how the enemy seeks to ambush and attack you, in your doctrine and in your life. And let me tell you, those attacks are many. They are constant. Perpetual. And often, intense even in their subtlety. And if you don’t understand what I’m talking about, then I would suggest that you are not sufficiently on guard against the devils schemes. Fighting requires vigilance. And,

**B. Fighting requires diligent effort.**

Hard work! Even when you’re tired. And indeed, that is one of Satan’s schemes, isn’t it. To tire you out. Be on guard! Fight hard. Notice our example here.

v.12-13

The people were positioned or stationed according to family, organized. And they were placed at the lowest places from behind the wall, a dry and bare place from whence approaching foes could be discerned at a distance. And they were working hard to be ready for battle.

v.16

Half the men worked on the wall construction, half the men

were dressed for warfare. And those on the outside of the wall had to be prepared for both, so they carried their weapons even as they laid the bricks in the wall.

v.17-18a

And they an alarm system. A siren to sound in the event of danger. It was the trumpeter.

v.18b “And the one who sounded the trumpet was beside me.”

There was obvious value in that trumpeter to a company of men working at some distance from one another but needing to be a common fighting force in the event of an attack from an enemy. These men were working hard! Indeed, to go even one step further,

### **C. Fighting requires extraordinary commitment.**

v.21

They worked long hours, around the clock, from the break of day until it became dark in the evening. And then there was the problem of nighttime. The people coming from rural villages preferred to spend the night in their homes, so there was travel to and fro, a movement into the city in the morning and out in the evening. Rush hour. But it was important to have all the men around in case the enemies should attack at night, and the men would have to guard the city at night and work by day.

v.22-23

Now, that doesn't mean that nobody slept, but that the guarding of the city was properly organized. And to note the most obvious outward evidence of their extraordinary commitment, the men were to sleep with their clothes on, with their weapon in hand, ready to fight immediately when the enemy attacks.

Extraordinary commitment.

But today, we are often lazy, aren't we? Too often we have very little of this sort of diligent effort. We struggle with the most basic forms of spiritual defense. Prayer, consistent, persistent, daily, intercessory prayer. And Bible reading. Daily devotions in God's word. Daily food for our souls, daily learning. And self-examination?

Daily? Is there within your spiritual disciplines a daily searching of your heart to find the places where Satan has established a beachhead? We consider our enemies to be far less threatening than a force of soldiers ready to invade our home and kill us at night. So we let our security down.

I admit that most of the time we leave our house unlocked, almost always. Even when we go out. I know I shouldn't, but I admit that my sense of security is quite strong and that is one of the benefits of living where we are. But I am also admitting to you that I can become careless.

How dangerous, how horrible, when that becomes true when it comes to the protection of your soul. How horrible, how dangerous that is when it comes to the warfare necessary to build and extend God's kingdom. We get careless, and lazy.

And we need to repent. And remain alert. We must be ready to fight for God's kingdom. And fight with everything that is within us, even sleeping with our clothes on, as it were, ready to do battle at a moment's notice.

Now, having said all that, and with no intention of contradicting all that I've said, let me say this.

### **III. GOD HIMSELF WILL FIGHT FOR HIS KINGDOM.**

There is great encouragement in these verses, the encouragement of knowing of the certainty of God's presence. If I left this out, if I left out this emphasis upon God and his presence, then all that I have said so far would leave you in the power of your own strength, and therefore very weak and afraid. But don't be afraid!

v.14

#### **A. God's presence in the battle should remove our fear.**

And take particular note of how Nehemiah defines God. "The Lord who is great and awesome." The great one. The one able to inspire awe, to demand honor by the mere display of his own authority. The one who is in Psalm 18 called our rock and our fortress. Our deliverer. My strength, my shield, the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. He's the one who will help. He's the one who will fight for you!

So what is it about these battles that you fear? Perhaps its a paralyzing fear of the devil, fearing his influence, power, and control upon you and the circumstances of your life. Perhaps it is the fear of those circumstances, the fear of what might be, the fear of what could be. Or the fear of being abandoned in the battle altogether.

"Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, great and awesome, and fight for your brethren, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses." God is with you. He will fight with you. For his kingdom. In doing so,

#### **B. God frustrates the plans of his enemies.**

Verse 15 is one of the verses that should give you a sense of holy delight at the evidence of God's justice and vengeance. God brings the plans of his enemies to nothing. Ultimately.

v.15

This is a great principle of the work of God today. He frustrates the plans of those who oppose him. And he does so with the omnipotence of sovereign authority. Indeed, he mocks those who think themselves strong enough to resist him.

Those taunting, triumphant words of Psalm 2 come to mind.

Ps. 2:1 "Why do the nations rage, And the people plot a vain thing? 2 The kings of the earth set themselves, And the rulers take counsel together, Against the LORD and against His Anointed, saying, 3 "Let us break Their bonds in pieces And cast away Their cords from us." 4 He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; The Lord shall hold them in derision. 5 Then He shall speak to them in His wrath, And distress them in His deep displeasure: 6 "Yet I have set My King On My holy hill of Zion.""

The Lord laughs! He scorns them. Mocks them. Holds them in derision. And then he makes his pronouncement, "I have set My King On Zion, my holy hill."

That is what should take away your fear, and here is where good theology becomes so very practical. Jesus Christ is on the throne now, seated as king upon God's holy hill. He is reigning and ruling now. So what do we have to be afraid of? Listen to these words of triumphant encouragement.

Psalm 27:1 "The LORD is my light and my salvation; Whom shall I fear? The LORD is the strength of my life; Of whom shall I be afraid?"

With words such as those, and in the text before us today, it is abundantly clear that,

#### **C. God fortifies us in the difficulty of battle.**

Fight hard. That's the exhortation. God will give you strength. That's the encouragement.

Those two must go together. The exhortation without the encouragement is exasperating, for we have no strength ourselves to carry it out. And the encouragement without the exhortation is vain and empty, for we need no encouragement if we shrink back from our responsibilities.

God fortifies those whose strength is failing! Then and now!  
v.10 Then Judah said, “The strength of the laborers is failing, and there is so much rubbish that we are not able to build the wall.”

Many of you might identify that very experience in your own lives? You feel the strain of that burden, sometimes simply the burden of life

v.10 “The strength of the laborers is failing, and there is so much rubbish that we are not able to build the wall.”

You might say, “My strength is failing, and there are so many problems that I am not able to accomplish anything.” The task is so overwhelming, and my strength is so limited, that I feel like I just can’t do it. With that perspective, look at,

v.19 “Then I said to the nobles, the rulers, and the rest of the people, “The work is great and extensive, and we are separated far from one another on the wall.”

That’s a general description of life sometimes, isn’t it? Go on to the next verse.

v.20 “Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us.”

That’s how you learn perseverance. Tribulation produces perseverance. Why is that? Because in God’s army, this is true, “When I am weak, then I am strong.” And that is true because of what God has said,

2 Cor.12:9 “And He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

So, when you experience failing strength in your own life, when the battles of life, the particular battles in which you have been placed, have caused your strength to fail, listen again.

v.19 “The work is great and extensive, and we are separated far from one another on the wall. 20 Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us.”

Because of that, people of God, remember what God has said. “My strength is made perfect in weakness.” So when you are weak, it is God who makes you strong.