

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, September 29, 1991, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

NEHEMIAH 4:6, 10-14

ENCOURAGING WORDS FROM GOD'S WORD

(4) WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU FEEL LIKE GIVING UP

We've looked, over the past three weeks, at some of the "Deadly D's" — we've looked at delay, doubt, defeat and today -- discouragement.

You know, folks, discouragement is perhaps mankind's deadliest disease. It's worse than polio, or MS, or AIDS, because it is universal. Everybody gets discouraged. Not only is it universal, it is highly contagious. If you're around someone who's discouraged, you can get discouraged fairly quickly. But, thank God, it's also curable.

I've heard it said that in professional sports, the pros never give up when they're in a slump. They just keep on playing the best they can until they ride it out. What do you do when you feel like giving up? Life has its ups and downs. Everyone has his or her "off" days. Maybe you've had an "off" week or an "off" month, and you feel like throwing in the sponge, and you ask yourself, "Is it worth it?"

I think one of the reasons the Book of Nehemiah is in the Bible is because this story gives us the causes of and the cures for discouragement. Let's look at it together – 4:6 – "So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart." Nehemiah had led some Jews back to Jerusalem from captivity in Babylon, to rebuild the wall to half its intended height.

Now look at verses 10 and 11: "Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, 'The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall.' Also, our enemies said, 'Before they know it, or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work.'"

Now in this passage we have four causes of discouragement. They got going on the project, but soon they began to get downhearted and discouraged. Why? There were four reasons.

I. The CAUSES of discouragement.

1. The first cause of discouragement is FATIGUE. Look at verse 10: "The strength of the laborers is giving out..." We just wear out. They had worked a long time and they were physically exhausted. And folks, when you're physically down, it's hard to be emotionally and spiritually up. My counsel to a lot of people who are discouraged is simply this: "You just need to get some 'R&R' -- rest and recreation." Sometimes the most spiritual thing you can do is to go

to bed. Vince Lombardi once said, "Fatigue makes cowards of all of us." That's true. It's amazing how much better things look after a good night's sleep. Maybe you don't need a change, maybe you just need a vacation. You know how farmers rotate crops, and they leave the land fallow -- they actually rest portions of the land, because every farmer knows that land that has rested produces a more abundant harvest.

Do any of you know who Frederick W. Taylor was? You ought to thank him, because in 1898 he did the first scientific study which proved that at the workplace people produce more if they have periodic breaks. So next time you take a coffee break, remember Mr. Taylor with gratitude!

So when do fatigue and discouragement usually set in? Look again at verse 6: "So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached (what?) half its height." Fatigue and discouragement come at the midpoint. You've always got energy when you start! It's a new project and you're working with all your heart; but after a while, when the newness of the project wears off, you're inclined to get bored; you start getting tired, and discouragement sets in.

Have you ever been doing yard work, and when you're about half way through, you realize you're tired, and you also realize that not only do you have to finish the job, but you have to clean up afterwards?! Fatigue comes at the midpoint, and that's why many people never complete anything. So the first cause of discouragement is fatigue.

2. The second cause of discouragement is FRUSTRATION. Notice verse 10: "The strength of the laborers is giving out" -- that's fatigue -- "and there is so much rubble..." -- that's frustration. They're talking about the litter, the debris, the trash that accompanies a building project. Those people were building the wall, and there were broken bricks and broken mortar, and all kinds of trash lying around, and it kept accumulating; and it caused them frustration because they were forever walking over it or around it; and perhaps someone stepped on a broken brick and sprained his ankle! Did you ever live in a house that you're remodeling at the same time?!

Frustration -- the rubble that builds up! Let me ask you -- do you have a job where the work is never finished, and your desk is piled a mile high with stuff? If so, you know what frustration is like, don't you?! And as soon as one project is completed, there's another one crying out to be attended to. That is frustration, and it can be a cause of discouragement.

Have you ever noticed how trash multiplies? It's kind of like rabbits! And if you don't clean it out periodically, it becomes a barrier to your main goal, and it will halt your progress. Now, you can't avoid rubble, but you've got to be able to recognize it, and know how to clean it out and get rid of it; otherwise you will be perpetually frustrated.

Now, what is the rubble in your life? The rubble consists of the trivial things in your life that keep you from accomplishing your real goals - maybe TV, maybe a relationship. It could be anything. It takes an inordinate amount of your time. What are the time-wasters in your life?

Fatigue, frustration. There's a third cause of discouragement:

3. FAILURE. Look at verse 10: “There is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall.” What are they saying? They’re saying, “We should never have undertaken this project in the first place. Who are we to think that we could ever finish this job?” And they were unable to finish the wall in the time they had set originally. They didn’t meet their deadline, and they got discouraged, and they gave up because they believed they had failed. “We didn’t do it on time.” **FAILURE** is the third cause of discouragement. Because they were unable to finish the task as quickly as planned, they lost heart.

Now the question is: How do you react to failure? How do you respond when your plans collapse? When things don’t get accomplished on time, do you get discouraged? Do you blame yourself? Or do you start blaming other people? Do you start complaining? “Just when I think I’m going to make ends meet, somebody moves the ends!” Winners see failures only as temporary setbacks.

There’s a fourth cause of discouragement:

4 FEAR. Look at verse 11: “Also our enemies said, ‘Before they know it or see us... we will kill them and put an end to the work.’” Now the background to the story is that there were numerous enemies who didn’t want that wall built, and they were doing everything they could to frustrate the plans of the rebuilders of the wall. First, they ridiculed them, then they criticized them, and finally they threatened them - “we’re going to kill you!”

Do you like to be ridiculed or unjustly criticized? I liked Judge Thomas’s story about Judge Hainsworth who was before the Senate Judiciary Committee for confirmation as a Supreme Court Justice. Some awful charges were levelled at him; and one morning, after breakfast, Mrs. Hainsworth was reading the newspaper, and looking up at her husband with a wry smile, she said, “If all this stuff is true, I don’t think I’d vote for this Hainsworth fellow either!” Nobody likes to be criticized. Nobody likes to be frightened either. Who gets afraid? Notice verse 12: “Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, ‘Wherever you turn, they will attack us.’”

The fact is, if you constantly live near negative people and listen to negative thoughts, you’re going to be infected. Now, what fears are causing you to be discouraged this morning? — fear of embarrassment, fear of failure, fear that you have to be perfect, fear that you are inadequate and won’t be able to handle pressure?

How do you know if you’re discouraged because of fear? Because you have an intense desire to run — to escape to Tahiti! “I’ve got to escape from the demands and the pressures that are crushing me!”

These are the common causes of discouragement, and once you identify your problem - is it fatigue, or frustration, or failure, or fear? — then you need to look at the antidote; and thank God, the antidote is right here in this passage too. So that brings us to

II. The CURES for discouragement.

1. Rest your body. The first thing Nehemiah did was to give everyone a little rest. As

you read the whole chapter you find that Nehemiah gave them some holidays. So, the first step to take if you're discouraged is to rest your body. Take one day a week for rest and refreshment as the Fourth Commandment tells you to do. Let's read Psalm 127:2 (Living Bible): "God wants His loved ones to get their proper rest." Some of you need to type that out and put it on your refrigerator door, or on your office desk! The Bible says, "it is senseless for you to work so hard from early morning until late at night, fearing you will starve to death" (Psalm 127:2, Living Bible). Look at Psalm 119:73 (Living Bible): "You made my body, Lord; now give me sense to heed Your laws." That just means eat right, exercise, get your sleep, and relax. Ignore that Fourth Commandment, and you're going to get discouraged.

2. Reorganize your life. Look at verse 13. When Nehemiah saw that the people were discouraged, he said, "Therefore I stationed some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families, with their swords, spears and bows." You know what he said? He said, "You people, go over here; and you folks, go over there; let's all get together in little groups of families, and we'll be support groups for each other." And he didn't give up on the goal of finishing the wall; he reorganized the people.

Now here's the point. When you are discouraged, often it does not mean you're doing the wrong thing, it may simply mean that you're doing the right thing, but you're doing it in the wrong way. And God doesn't want you to give up on your dream. He just wants you to reorganize and try a new approach.

You're going into debt: reorganize your budget. You're overcommitted: reorganize your time schedule. You're out of shape: reorganize your lifestyle, reorganize your eating patterns. Nehemiah effected a reorganization.

Maybe you need to reorganize your life and set some priorities. Make sure that you have time for the things that are most important - God, family, church. Make sure that those things are firmly embedded in your life plan.

Ken Deikwald has a series of tapes on "high performance people." They interviewed hundreds of high performers and came up with five factors that are common in all high performers regardless of their field of endeavor. And number four is strong relationships, and love, and support groups.

Notice that Nehemiah grouped the wall builders by families. Why? Because we need each other. That's why we need our church. Over and over again in the Bible it says "one another" — love one another, serve one another, help one another, care for one another, pray for one another, greet one another, encourage one another, exhort one another -- 50 times in the New Testament we find that phrase -- "one another" -- because we need support. If you're acting like a Lone Ranger, you're going to get discouraged. We need each other. That's why you need to be a part of a small group. Join a Bible study. Get involved, so that you have other people who are supporting you. "He stationed them by families."

They've done a study of survivors — why people survive in major accidents adrift at sea, and things like that. And they have found that the number one characteristic of survivors is this: "I stayed alive because I wanted to see my kids grow up." Or, "I stayed alive because I wanted to

be with my wife again.” Or, “I stayed alive because my family needed me.” There was a support group that gave them the motivation to hang in there and not give up. So, rest your body, reorganize your life, and

3. Remember the Lord, Look at verse 14. Nehemiah is saying, “After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, ‘Don’t be afraid of them. Remember the Lord Who is great and awesome...’” What’s he saying here? He’s saying, “Recommit yourself spiritually.” And for us that means, “Recommit your life to Christ. Draw on spiritual resources. Get plugged in to heaven’s power supply.” Typically, when we get discouraged it means that we’ve got our eyes off the Lord and on to the problem. The Bible says that when David got discouraged, “he encouraged himself in the Lord” (1 Samuel 30:6),

Now, what do you remember when you are discouraged? There are three things you need to remember:

- Remember God’s goodness to you in the past. Start making a list of all the things that have been good in your life.

“Count your many blessings, name them one by one,
And it will surprise you what the Lord has done.”

Say to yourself, “I’m going to make a list of 100 things I’m grateful for.” Psychologists say that the single healthiest emotion you can have is gratitude -the attitude of gratitude. Remember God’s goodness to you in the past.

- Remember God’s closeness to you in the present. He’s with you right now! There was an old Chinese Christian, a Mr. Lo, who used to say, “Jesus speaks to me personally in the Bible; He says, ‘Lo, I am with you always...! I will never leave you or forsake you!’” There is no experience that you will go through in life that God doesn’t go through with you. So you can always say, “I’m not in this alone!”

- Remember God’s power for the future. Over and over again the Bible is full of promises like this: “Your strength will equal your days” (Deuteronomy 33:25). “Those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint” (Isaiah 40:31, King James Version). So, get your mind off the discouraging circumstance and focus your devotion and your trust upon the Lord.

Look at Psalm 119:25 (Living Bible): “I am completely discouraged -- I lie in the dust.” Revive me by television, revive me by going to a good restaurant, or by buying things on a shopping spree, or by going to a Redskins game, or by vacationing in Hawaii? No -- “Revive me by Your Word.” If you want the quickest antidote to discouragement, get into this Book! This series, “Encouraging Words from God’s Word” could go on for a year because there’s so much material in here to deal with that’s encouraging. Get into the Word of God. “Remember the Lord.”

One of my favorite verses is Jonah 2:7. Jonah is at the bottom of the sea in the belly of a

great fish, and he holds a prayer meeting! He says, “When I had lost all hope, I once again turned my thoughts to the Lord.” After that, it was no wonder that the fish made for shore and coughed Jonah up! But there’s a fourth thing you can do to defeat discouragement:

4. Resist the discouragement. Nehemiah said (verse 14), “Don’t be afraid of them.” Remember the Lord, Who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes.” He’s saying, “Don’t give in to discouragement without a fight! Don’t just roll over and play dead.”

There’s a fable about Satan and his cohorts who assembled one day to discuss the topic, “How can we neutralize Christians? They’re born again; they’re going to heaven; we can’t get them into hell; but how do we neutralize them so that they won’t grow in numbers?” One demon said, “Why don’t we tell them that the Bible is a bunch of lies?” But everybody said, “That won’t work. They’re smarter than that.” Another demon said, “Spread the rumor that prayer doesn’t work.” And they all said, “You’ve got to be kidding. Millions of them have had their prayers answered.” A third demon said, “I know the solution; let’s just discourage them!” And Satan said, “That will work!”

D. L. Moody once said, “I have never known God to use a discouraged person.” You don’t determine a person’s greatness by his talent, or his wealth, or his income, or his education. You determine his greatness by what it takes to discourage him. So, you resist discouragement.

As Christians, we are in a spiritual warfare. The Bible says that the devil is an accuser of Christians. You know what “accuser” means. Satan is always saying, “You’re not good enough; you’re a failure; who do you think you are to call yourself a Christian? You’re nothing. Give up. Forget it.” And he would love to neutralize your effectiveness, and his favorite weapon is discouragement.

James 4:7 says, “Resist the devil and he will flee from you.” You don’t have to be discouraged. If you are discouraged it is because you are choosing to be discouraged. What are you looking at? Are you looking at the problem, or are you looking at the solution? Great Christians simply don’t know how to give up! They just keep on keeping on.

Somebody asked a fellow one day, “What is your favorite Bible verse? And he said, “My favorite verse is, ‘It came to pass.’” And his friend said, “Why?” And he said, “Because when problems come, I know they don’t come to stay, they come to pass!”

Folks, you may think right now that it’s the end of the world -- you’re so “down” because of fatigue, frustration, failure, or fear.

But remember — it comes to pass!

AMEN.