

Faith and Fight • Nehemiah 4:15–23

*I tell the parable of warriors three,
whose battle was life, just as we.*

*The first of the warriors entered the fray,
speaking his motto just this way:
“The enemy is great and strong,
his weapon is hate and his cause
is wrong.*

*I shall fight with sword sharp to kill;
I shall fight with might and skill.”*

*The second of the warriors entered the fray,
speaking his motto just this way:
“The enemy is great and strong,
his weapon is hate and his cause
is wrong.*

*I shall pray and trust the God I love;
I shall leave the fight to the One
above.”*

*The third of the warriors entered the fray,
speaking his motto just this way:
“The enemy is great and strong,
his weapon is hate, and his cause
is wrong.*

*I shall fight with all my might,
with sword and
skill for what is right.
And I shall trust and pray
and surely know
that God alone
will win the day.”*

***The only way you are ever
going to see God win the
battle is to stay in the battle.***

*The battle was bloody and long,
twice the kills for those who were
wrong*

*The first was defeated for lack of his Lord,
the second died because he brought
no sword.*

*The third was the winner that day
for he fought with all he had
against the wrong
depending in full faith on the God
who is strong.*

The point of the parable is that there are two sides to the battles of life: the fight side and the faith side. Let’s look at both sides in the record of Nehemiah 4:15-23.

The city of Jerusalem was surrounded by the Samaritans to the north, the Arabs to the south, the Ammonites on the east and the Ashdodites on the west. Under the capable leadership of Nehemiah the frightened Jews chose fight over flight. And when they stood up to fight, the threatened attack of their enemies never materialized. At least not right away! So they proceeded with rebuilding the wall and welded together the fight side and the faith side of their battle in order to survive and succeed.

The fight side of the battle really began in verse 15. This part of the story begins with everyone returning to work. Nehemiah explains, “When our enemies heard that we were aware of their plot and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to his own work.”

The measure of success and worth of most projects is not in beginning but in continuing. The wall was half built. The opposition was great. The discouragement was tough. The easiest thing would have been to quit. But they “returned to the wall.”

Let me tell you that the lack of perseverance in people’s lives is often the number 1 reason for defeat. We quit too soon. We get a job half done, face some opposition and then bail out. People bail out of churches, out of jobs, out of homes, out of marriages and out of other things when they could win if they just hung in there a little longer.

A well-known contemporary theologian who is not often quoted in sermons is Woody Allen who says, “Eighty percent of success is showing up.”

There are lots of times that I feel like quitting. Pressures start building up. But one thing that enables me to persevere is that I want to be around when God does his great thing. I would hate to miss out on God’s grace just because I quit.

The same goes for you. The only way you are ever going to see God win the battle is to stay in

the battle. The only chance God has of making a success of your marriage is if you are still in it. The way for God to turn you kids out right is for you to hang in there as a parent.

You and I have a responsibility on the fight side of the battle of life. A large part of that responsibility is simply to stay in the battle, to show up at work, to be there when God brings the victory . . . to persevere!

Nehemiah and the people made some significant changes. He writes:

“From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bow and armor. The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah who were building the wall.”

This represented a major reorganization of this project. Nehemiah had his own men with him. They were probably all Persians who were highly trained and experienced as workers, bodyguards and advisers. Up until this time in the building of the first half of the wall he had deployed them as engineering advisors to the Jews who were quite inexperienced in building walls. But when attack was imminent it became necessary for Nehemiah to reassign them. He had to pull them away from their task as workers and engineers and use them increasingly as a police force.

Another interesting historical detail is that the weapons here described were standard equipment in the Persian army: spears and bows for offense; shields for defense in hand-to-hand conflict and a coat of mail for defense against arrows. This was sort of the ancient equivalent to a modern bullet-proof vest. The purpose of it was to deflect arrows.

The point is that Nehemiah was flexible in reassigning his resources and his people. They were willing to do what needed to be done. They were willing to reorganize.

That is the way we have to be. Life's battles can change as quickly as Minnesota weather in the winter. We can't always fight today the way we did yesterday. We must be open to change.

But let's get this flexibility into perspective. It is purpose-driven flexibility. They kept their purpose the same and stuck with it, but they were willing to change their methodology to get the jobs done.

Recently I was in San Ysidro, California, on the border with Mexico, right across from Tijuana. There were two men standing on a corner with gospel literature and a bullhorn telling people that they were sinners and that they needed to repent and accept Jesus Christ as Savior and acknowledge him as Lord. I think their purpose was good, but since no one was listening to them perhaps they should have been flexible enough to change their method.

Do not confuse perseverance and flexibility. Persevere with what is right. Be flexible in reaching the right. To confuse the two is a sure formula for failure!

Nehemiah 4:17-20 demonstrates a very practical truth. It is the practical truth that great dreams succeed or fail on the basis of many little details. Political campaigns are won and lost through thousands of hours of calls, meetings, news releases and handshakes. Church buildings are built through the efforts of large numbers of people doing ordinary tasks such as committee meetings and planning sessions.

Sometimes I hear people complain about attention to detail in the Lord's work. They speak as if matters of management and administration and delegation are contrary to the work of the Holy Spirit. Not so! God's work has its practical side as well.

Look at the practical things these workers in Jerusalem did. They worked out a system for burden bearers to defend themselves. These were the ones who carried rocks to the wall and rubbish away from the wall. They were particularly vulnerable because so much of their work was on the outside of the wall. They worked out a system whereby they carried tools for construction in one hand and a weapon in the other. Actually, the word translated "weapon" is literally "missile" (it could have been a rock).

The workers on the wall needed both hands free but they might also have to fight. So, "each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked" (Nehemiah 4:18). They wouldn't have been the first to be attacked, but they wouldn't have had time to go get a sword from home, either.

They even worked out an alarm/communication system if there was an attack. After all, the perimeter of the wall was a mile and a half. Nehemiah 4:18-20 tells us:

The man who sounded the trumpet stayed with me.

Then I said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, “The work is extensive and spread out, and we are widely separated from each other along the wall. Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!”

It’s all very practical! That’s part of the fight side of life. We need to do what needs to be done. We need to get organized. We need to use the right hand for one thing and the left hand for another. We need to work on communication.

When you face a tough battle, don’t just pray about it. Be responsible. Be practical. Think through what needs to be done and figure out what you can do to get things done.

A major part of practicality is hard work. Someone well said, “Success is 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration.” Parenting is mostly hard work. School is mostly hard work. Being an athlete is mostly hard work. Making it as a musician is hard work. Hard work is what makes careers, marriages and just about everything else worth having.

And those Jews worked hard according to Nehemiah 4:21-22:

So we continued the work with half the men holding spears, from the first light of dawn till the stars came out. At that time I also said to the people, “Have every man and his helper stay inside Jerusalem at night, so they can serve us as guards by night and workmen by day.”

The 8-hour workday hadn’t been invented yet. Usually laborers worked from sunrise to sunset, but Nehemiah extended the hours past sunset until the stars came out. They rotated between wall building and guarding. Those from outlying areas were kept in the city for their safety and in order to lengthen working hours.

Hard work! Don’t underestimate its necessity and don’t think there is much success in life’s battles without it. It’s a major part of the fight side of life!

But none of this would have been possible without personal commitment. Nehemiah and the people

had it! In verse 23, Nehemiah said, “Neither I nor my brothers nor my men nor the guards with me took off our clothes; each had his weapon, even when he went for water.” It’s no wonder they built the wall! They were committed! They didn’t take time to change clothes. They were on duty around the clock.

Surely that kind of commitment is necessary to win on the fight side of life, but such commitment is a reward in itself! I feel sorry for those who are not committed. They are not committed to a marriage or a family or a church or a job or a goal. Life lacks meaning because life lacks commitment. It’s a sad way to live.

Well, add all of them up: PERSEVERANCE; FLEXIBILITY; PRACTICALITY; HARD WORK; PERSONAL COMMITMENT. They add up to the fight side of life. They aren’t easy, but neither is life. However, note well, you can have all five ingredients and come out a loser if you are missing the faith side of life!

It is interesting reading when you here discover that with all the perseverance, flexibility, practicality,

work and commitment . . . that Nehemiah gives the credit for success to God! His theology shows through when he says in verse 15: “When our enemies heard that we were aware of their plot and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to his own work.”

Nehemiah believed in an omnipresent God. He believed that God was both inside the wall with the Jews and outside the wall with the enemies. He believed that God was doing on the other side that which could never be accomplished by perseverance, flexibility, practicality, work or commitment.

This takes faith! It takes faith to believe that God is able to be where we cannot be and able to do what we cannot do. When sitting for a job interview, God is on our side and on the employer’s side. When involved in a lawsuit, God is on both sides of the bench. God is present on both sides of every battle. Realize the significance of this truth. He is where we can never go. He influences those over whom we have no influence. He is on every side of every battle. He goes with our children to school,

***There is nowhere God is not!
He is omnipresent!***

with our parents to the hospital, with our friends to court. There is nowhere God is not! He is omnipresent!

But an omnipresent God makes little difference if he has no power. Nehemiah believed that God was all places and all-powerful. In verse 20 he said, “Our God will fight for us!” The God who makes solar systems out of nothing; the God who created all life, who brought plagues on the Egyptians and dried the Red Sea for the Jews; the God of all power and all places is the God who fights for Nehemiah and his people.

What an astonishing difference of perspective this makes! This makes the fight worth it. This makes the outcome sure. This takes the burden of full responsibility off of us all. For when we fail, he will succeed. This is like going into a fight with a Swiss Army knife as a weapon but having a partner with everything from a machine gun to a nuclear bomb at his disposal.

It is because of the “faith side” of Nehemiah’s life that he could look at the surrounding army and not despair. He was absolutely convinced that the final outcome of the battle was in God’s almighty hands.

If that’s so, you ask, why do we need to fight at all? Why bother with perseverance, flexibility, practicality, work and commitment? Because that’s the deal! God has called us both to believe and to be responsible. He has called us to faith and to fight. That way the victory is not only assured but we share the victory with him.

One of my favorite stories is about the brilliant musician Paderevsky. He was in town for a concert, so the mother of a young piano student bought two tickets for his concert thinking it might inspire her young son to practice.

They arrived early and got front row seats in the concert hall. She became engaged in conversation with some neighbors who were nearby and lost track of her boy who, as an eight-year old is prone to do, explored all the far reaches of the concert hall. When it came time for the concert to begin, to her amazement and horror it was not the maestro at the piano but her son, plunking away at his lesson, mistakes and all. The crowd hushed to see what would happen.

The boy was oblivious both to the audience and

to the concert pianist. He walked up behind the lad and put his arms around the boy and his hands on the keys. He began to play as the boy played, adding notes and chords and runs, turning childish effort into something musically magnificent.

When the boy realized what was happening he stopped, but Paderevsky whispered in his ear, “Keep on playing; keep on playing!”

That’s what God tells us to do. When we feel like quitting, when our tunes are discordant and our battles seem to be going to the side of defeat, God comes up behind us, puts his arms around us and changes our inadequacy into a masterpiece. When we think for sure we are going to lose, he says, “Keep on fighting; keep on fighting.” And when we discover that all the world is watching and our tunes are out of key, he tells us, “Keep on playing; keep on playing!”

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