

REMEMBER THE LORD WHEN CIRCUMSTANCES THREATEN**Nehemiah 4:7-14**

Everyone loves a story. There is something about a story that seems to stick to our memories far better than most other words. So, I tell you a story of long ago and far away. It is a story about threatening circumstances.

Our story begins 25 centuries ago in the far western reaches of the Persian Empire. It was the location where a once proud city lay in ruins. A high-ranking official in the court of King Artaxerxes received a call from God to rescue and rebuild the city. The city was Jerusalem and the hero of our story was Nehemiah.

Nehemiah rallied the residents of the city of Jerusalem. These people were broken in spirit; they little hope, but Nehemiah shared the vision of a rebuilt wall and a renewed city. Many, but not all, made up their minds to work and gave their hands to the massive task.

But there was opposition that came from every side. To the north were Sanballat and the Samaritans. Sanballat was the arch-enemy and leader of the opposition. To the south were the Arabs, to the east were Ammonites and to the west were the Ashdodites. On every side there were those bent on stopping the reconstruction of the city walls.

When the surrounding opposition saw that the wall was half built, they became very angry. You would think they would be glad. But it takes a special kind of person to be happy with another's success. Instead, they were angry because the wall was going well. They were angry because their predictions of failure weren't coming true. They were angry because they felt inferior as a result of the achievements of the builders. Such angry people are usually sad people. They hurt themselves from the inside out with anger that is very, very painful.

But angry people can also be very dangerous people. All the neighbors of Jerusalem got together. They conspired to turn their anger into attack. If they couldn't get their way with words they would stoop to violence. They actually wrote a plan whereby they were going to attack the city of Jerusalem, a plan that was clearly illegal because Nehemiah was operating under royal orders. The king and the law were on the side of the Jews. Such a conspiracy and attack could bring down the heavy hand of the Persian army on those devising the plan.

Angry people do some crazy things. When people are angry they are controlled more by their emotions than by reason. They lash out in violence and give little thought to the law or the consequences of their actions.

Actually, I think they hoped there would never be an attack. They planned it, but they hoped the mere threat of an attack would so scare and confuse the Jews that they would stop building the wall and their plan would be accomplished without any bloodshed. But such tactics have a danger all their own because such threats too often get out of hand and end up where no one ever would have anticipated.

Well, Nehemiah, the leader of the Jews, found out about the conspiracy. He heard about the threatened attack by the Samaritans, Arabs, Ammonites and Ashdodites. Actually, it wasn't a secret! Those surrounding enemies wanted Nehemiah and the people of Jerusalem to know about the proposed attack. They just didn't want them to know when the attack was coming. They wanted to scare the workers so they wouldn't work.

That meant that Nehemiah faced a very real problem. The very prospect of an attack became a drain both on emotions and on resources. So he did two things; he prayed and he set a guard. What an amazing example of faith and works!

Medieval monks had a Latin saying: "Ora et Laborem" which meant "prayer and work". That's the way Nehemiah figured it: prayer plus guards. Prayer that trusted God; guards that met responsibility. **There are some people who pray without work and are irresponsible; there are other people who work without prayer and they are unspiritual. The best is to have both!** Nehemiah was a man who trusted God and met the responsibilities God had given to him.

Then a very sad and scary thing happened. The workers of Judah wanted to quit! Just when the wall was half done. They said, "The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall." Actually, this was a song. Everyone was singing the popular jingle. The bad news was traveling fast, morale was sinking and the work was stopping.

There was truth to the jingle. With half the workers now keeping guard day and night, they were tired. And the ones not keeping guard had twice the work to do. Everyone was getting tired and tired people become discouraged people. And the rubbish! The years of ruin had left lots of trash. It was piling up and getting in the way. Work was hard to do.

You know, it always happens. People have great dreams to build marriages and businesses and churches and walls, then come the tiredness and the trash. It gets folks down. There's a desire to quit halfway through.

Their spirits were broken; their bodies were weary; their trash was piled high; they wanted to stop. So they sang, "We cannot rebuild the wall." But that really wasn't the reason they wanted to quit. The real reason they wanted to quit was because they were scared. They had heard what the Samaritans, Arabs, Ammonites and Ashdodites were saying: "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." They were scared by the words of others. Just because someone said it they believed it!

Has this ever happened to you? Everything was going great and then someone said something threatening. You started to worry. Their words had a strange power over you and began to steal your happiness and weaken your strength. You felt like quitting but you needed a better excuse than the words of your enemies. So you found an excuse, a rationalization.

Yes, they were scared. And the rumors continued to rumble. Again and again the Jews who lived out near the Samaritans, Arabs, Ammonites and Ashdodites kept visiting Jerusalem and saying, "Wherever you turn, they will attack us." The workers were getting the message: "Quit working and get going!" Those who had come in from the villages to help needed to get back to the villages before the attack came and those who lived in Jerusalem needed to go with them or their families might be killed. What good was a noble project if you died in the process of accomplishing it? They were scared; that was the real reason that they wanted to quit.

They would have quit, if it hadn't been for Nehemiah. He was a capable leader. He was smart enough to figure out what was really happening and spiritual enough to trust God for the outcome. So here's what he did. Nehemiah brought the people together in clusters, usually by their families. He asked them to take their weapons, typically farmers' weapons of spears and swords and bows, not the weapons of a large army like the Persians with battering ram and catapult, and stand in the holes in the wall. That accomplished two things. For the enemies on the outside looking at the wall all they could see was that every place there was a breach there were people ready to fight. And so they imagined that the parts of the wall behind which they could not see also had soldiers with spears and bows and swords. And they imagined that the entire inside perimeter of the city of Jerusalem and its wall were filled with those who were ready to fight. That gave second thoughts to the attackers.

But it also did something for the morale of the people within the city of Jerusalem. When you are discouraged and you're alone, your discouragement tends to grow and your morale tends to decline. But when you cluster together with your family and friends, when you stand side by side, weapon in hand, then hope is raised, and the prospect of succeeding becomes a genuine hope and dream.

Then Nehemiah their leader spoke to them: “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.”

Nehemiah was telling them to get their eyes off the Samaritans, Arabs, Ammonites and Ashdodites and get their eyes on God. If they were going to be scared, they should be scared of God, not the neighbors! After all, who is bigger? Who is better?

You can almost hear the thoughts of the workers! “Yeah, he’s right! God is great. Why are we scared? We’ve got God. Yeah, remember the Lord. Remember the Lord.”

But Nehemiah stayed practical. He also told them to fight for what was right. He told them to fight to preserve the lives and futures of their brothers and sons and daughters and wives and homes. Great leadership from Nehemiah! He pointed them to God and listed the personal benefits as well.

Now there is a moral to this story. The moral is to “think God and fight for right!” It’s a moral to remember when circumstances and threats scare us. It’s for when we are ready to quit because we are tired and the rubbish is piled high. It’s a moral to remember when our Samaritans, Arabs, Ammonites and Ashdodites surround us. It’s for when the problems are bigger than anything we’ve ever faced and we think we are sure to lose.

Think God! Remember how great he is. Remember how much stronger he is than any problem. Remember how much smarter and better he is than any enemy. Quit singing the jingles of doom. Quit thinking about quitting. Remember God.

But that’s not all. Do what God wants you to even if the odds are against you. When enemies surround you, when circumstances threaten you . . . **think God and fight for right!**