

Halfway!

Nehemiah . . . Memoirs of an Ordinary Man – Part IX

Nehemiah 4:7-23

Introduction

It was many years ago, at the beginning of a major conflict in Europe, that Germany mounted an invasion of Poland. Poland was fairly unconcerned. They had a history of repelling enemy attacks from the barbarians of warring neighbors. The Polish army was renowned for its skilled horsemanship – their Calvary was well trained and their horses were among Europe’s finest.

When they learned that German forces were advancing, they prepared twelve brigades of their finest warriors. With swords flashing in the sunlight, the Calvary officers sounded the charge and their horses surged forward with powerful strides. The trouble was, this was not a war fought a thousand years ago, this was World War II. Manchester, in his biography of Winston Churchill, wrote that this Calvary galloped their horses proudly right into the path of newly designed German panzer tanks. The outcome was predictable – total devastation.

I am convinced that we, as believers, often expect to take on the enemy of our soul with methods that rival galloping at full speed into the path of an oncoming German tank. The Devil, Lucifer, Satan, the Deceiver, the Father of Lies, the Red Dragon, or any other biblical name you choose to use for the Prince of Hell, is on a search and destroy mission. He seeks to deceive, to destroy, to distract, to divide any attempt by Christians who seek to advance the kingdom of light and the glory of the Prince of Heaven.

We have been warned, in the book of Ephesians, chapter 6, verses 10 through 13, to,

. . . be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of His might.

Then we are commanded to,

Put on the full armor of God, that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore, take up the full armor of God, that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.

In other words, we are to be properly prepared for battle. You do not resist German tanks on horseback. And, you do not resist the lure of the Red Dragon with one hour of church and a blessing before lunch and dinner. You are to clothe yourselves in the armor of the warrior, which has been designed by God for the Christian warrior.

An Essential Weapon For Any Believer

One of the pieces of armor, designed by God, that I often think of in my own struggle with the enemy, is the shield of faith. It is an essential weapon for any believer!

I say weapon, because it is not only defensive, but also offensive. I personally do not believe that these pieces of armor are merely defensive, except for the sword of the Spirit. They all have an offensive element in resisting the temptation, the method, the scheme, the lure of the Red Dragon.

Paul refers to it in Ephesians, chapter 6, verse 16, as,

... the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming missiles of the evil one.

The object of our shield of faith –

The shield has to do with the object of our faith.

When tested by battle conditions, our faith in God has three important aspects.

1. First, our shield of faith is in the living reality of God's person.

David, the psalmist, wrote, in Psalm, chapter 3, verse 3,

But Thou, O Lord, art a shield for me . . .

2. Secondly, our shield is faith in the reality of God's promises.
3. And, thirdly, our shield is faith in God's providence.

As it tells us in Romans, chapter 8, verses 28 and 29,

And we know that God causes all things to work together for [our] good . . . [our spiritual] conformation to the image of His Son . . .

God is behind every scene, engineering everything toward the praise of His glory.

A few years ago, I was on the phone with a pastor named Charlie. Charlie was supposed to have called me the day before, but he did not call. So, I called the next morning. We talked awhile and I said, "Now what about those dates we talked about, are they going to work out?"

I will never forget him saying, "Boy, I don't know where my calendar is. Things are a little confusing right now – you see, my nine-year-old son was hit by a car yesterday and killed."

In the thick of the battle, circumstances occur and a fiery missile hits directly into your shield. "Do you really believe that God is working everything out for your good and for His glory? Look at what you're having to endure. When is the last time you've heard His voice?"

You say, "You're right, I don't think He really cares."

So, you throw your shield down, and now you are open to the enemy like never before.

He cannot steal your soul, if you are a Christian, but he can steal your song.

I remember being so convicted because, that same night, I had been at the pharmacy. One of our daughters had a 104.6 degree temperature. Her mom had her in the bathtub, sponging her with cold water. It was midnight, and I was getting some medicine. There I was thinking, "Lord, life is really lousy right now. Why can't this kind of thing happen after breakfast on my day off? Can't You time these trials a little more conveniently?"

I later realized that, while I was standing in that drugstore, Charlie was standing on a curbside where life forever changed. And, when I talked to him that morning, Charlie and his family were hanging on to their shields for dear life.

The operation of our shield of faith –

This Roman shield, that Paul talked about, gives us insight into the operation of our faith as Christian soldiers.

It was not a small shield. In fact, it was often referred to as a door. It was large and rectangular and could be planted in the ground and hidden behind. It was overlapped with leather and soaked with water so that the flaming arrows from enemy archers would hit the shield and simply fizzle out.

1. So, first, it protected the soldier from the fiery missiles of the enemy.

By the way, the shield also protected the rest of the soldier's armor. Study, sometime, the relationship between your faith in God and the helmet of salvation, the belt of truth, and the shoes of the gospel message.

Our confidence in God's person, promise, and providence protects everything about us, as believers, from the fire of the Red Dragon.

2. Secondly, the shield unified the army.

The Romans had invented this shield to be used collectively. The edges of these shields were beveled and notched so that they could be locked into place with the shield next to them. You could actually have a row of men that made a wall of metal advancing against the enemy.

What a tremendous illustration of the church – marching together with unified purpose, passion, and heart.

Someone came to me recently and said, "Hey, Stephen, did you know that the Apostles in the book

of Acts traveled around together in the same automobile?”

I said, “Really!”

He said, “Yes, it says in Acts that they were all in one Accord!”

What kind of impact could we have when, with unified hearts toward advancing the glory of God, we are in one accord?

The bad thing is that we are going to think of a Honda every time we hear that verse!

One more point about the shield, as I come to the conclusion of my introduction.

3. The shield not only protected the soldier and unified the army, it also reflected the sun.

In the center of each shield was a round piece of brass. Before going into war, the soldiers would polish that brass so that it shone with the brilliance of a mirror. As they walked into battle, they would reflect the light of the sun into the eyes of their enemies.

What a wonderful illustration of the believer who reflects, by faith, the truth of God’s Son, Who is the Light of the world. The enemy is easily distracted by the brilliance of the Son. The Dragon hates the name of Christ. He hates the reflection of Christ’s gospel – that Jesus Christ died and was buried but rose again on the third day. The brilliant light of the gospel dispels the darkness.

So, when the Dragon approaches, hide behind the shield, or link it to another believer’s shield. Reflect on the light of God’s promises, the attributes of God’s person, and the security of God’s providence.

Those three things make up the shield of faith – His Person, His promises, and His providence.

An Instructive Model For Any Believer

Nowhere in all of scripture will you find the shield of faith so clearly demonstrated than in the book of Nehemiah. I would invite you to pitch your tent with me just inside the city walls that are now halfway built. We are in chapter 4, and the enemies have just added another army to their ranks.

Notice verses 7 and 8.

Now when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites heard that the repair of the walls of Jerusalem went on, and that the breaches began to be closed, they were very angry. And all of them

conspired together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause a disturbance in it.

If you had a map to look at the enemy nations, you would notice that, with the presence of the Ashdodites, or Philistines, to the west, Jerusalem is now completely surrounded. Verse 6 informs us of the reason why the enemies were so alarmed,

So we built the wall and the whole wall was joined together to half its height . . .

The walls were halfway up when the enemies of God put together a plan to attack Jerusalem.

Let us be as practical as possible here. What a wonderful time for the enemy to turn up the heat. The Jewish people are now halfway finished. And, the halfway point of any project is perhaps the most difficult point to push past and to keep going.

Whether you are running the mile and you reach the halfway point, or you are halfway through a difficult semester, or halfway through a household renovation project and the mess looks bigger than the goal, halfway is a difficult hurdle in the course of life. The newness has worn off and the reality of the challenge has set in.

And, even though the people prayed to God, (verse 9 tells us this, as well as to set up a guard), a popular song was being chanted in Jerusalem. Look at verses 10 and 13.

Thus in Judah it was said, “The strength of the burden bearers is failing, yet there is much rubbish; and we ourselves are unable to rebuild the wall.” . . . then I stationed men in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, the exposed places, and I stationed the people in families with their swords, spears and bows.

Dissecting Discouragement

Let us stop for a moment and dissect this lure called discouragement. It happens to be one of Satan’s most powerful tools. More believers have headed for the sidelines because of discouragement than, perhaps, any other reason. And, it would not be surprising to discover that discouragement is often felt most deeply at some halfway point in life.

1. First, people were tired.

Verse 10a tells us they sang,

. . . The strength of the burden bearers is failing.

The first half of the job had exhausted them. They were physically worn out and vulnerable because of it.

2. Secondly, the people were distracted.

Notice the next line, in verse 10.

. . . yet there is much rubbish . . .

The key word is the word “yet.” In other words, they were physically exhausted. Yet, in spite of all the work they had done, there was still all this rubbish, or literally, “dry earth, debris.”

Did you notice where the people had begun to focus their attention? Not on what had been finished, not on the progress they had made, but on all the stuff in their way. There were years of stones, overgrown vines, rubbish, and mounds of dirt. That was all they could see.

There are times when you are raising children, or accomplishing a demanding task at work, or finishing a project, or building a marriage when you cannot see past the rubbish. You ignore what has been accomplished and focus, instead, on what has not happened yet. It is the hurdle of being halfway.

3. No wonder their song continues, in verse 10, to tell us that, thirdly, the people felt hopeless.

When you are physically exhausted, the work does not let up, and all you see is unfinished business, the next characteristic of discouragement sets in. Notice as verse 10 continues,

. . . and we ourselves are unable to rebuild the wall.

“That’s it, Nehemiah. We tried. We made it halfway, but we’ll never make it to the top.”

And to make matters even worse, their discouragement was mixed with fear.

4. Fourth, the people were afraid of their future.

Look at verses 11 and 12,

And our enemies said, “They will not know or see until we come among them, kill them, and put a stop to the work. And it came about when the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times, “They will come up against us from every place where you may turn,”

Don’t you love these other Jews who live in the surrounding area? In verse 12, they,

. . . came and told us ten times . . .

“You’ll never make it. You won’t survive. The enemy is too numerous. No matter where you turn, they’ll be waiting for you.”

Thanks a lot!

The people were ready to throw in the towel and run for cover.

Verse 14,

When I saw their fear, I rose and spoke to the nobles, the officials, and the rest of the people: “Do not be afraid of them; remember the Lord who is great and awesome . . .

The people had compared the enemies’ strength to theirs, and concluded, “We don’t have a chance!”

But Nehemiah compared their enemies’ strength to the that of God, and their enemies didn’t have a chance.

Continue to verses 15 through 23.

And it happened when our enemies heard that it was known to us, and that God had frustrated their plan, then all of us returned to the wall, each one to his work. And it came about from that day on, half of my servants carried on the work while half of them held the spears, the shields, the bows, and the breastplates; and the captains were behind the whole house of Judah. Those who were rebuilding the wall and those who carried burdens took their load with one hand doing the work and the other holding a weapon. As for the builders, each wore his sword girded at his side as he built, while the trumpeter stood near me. And I said to the nobles, the officials, and the rest of the people, “The work is great and extensive, and we are separated on the wall far from one another. At whatever place you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us.” So we carried on the work with half of them holding spears from dawn until the stars appeared. At that time I also said to the people, “Let each man with his servant spend the night within Jerusalem so that they may be a guard for us by night and a laborer by day.” So neither I, my brothers, my servants, nor the men of the guard who followed me, none of us removed our clothes, each took his weapon even to the water.

The Timeless Principles of Defense

Let me give you four timeless principles of defense:

1. First, the people prayed to God.
2. Then, the people prepared for battle.

“Petition without precaution is presumption.”

Oliver Cromwell once said,

We will trust in God and keep our gunpowder dry.

3. Thirdly, the people continued the process of building.

They went back to the wall; they stayed at the task; they returned their eyes to their God and to their goal.

4. And, fourthly, the people committed to defending one another.

Nehemiah said, in verse 20,

At whatever place you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us.

He is saying, “If you hear the trumpet, drop everything and come running. We’ll fight together, with the Lord’s strength, wherever the enemy may attack.”

In other words, “Be prepared to link your shield of faith to the soldier next to you . . . no one fights alone.”

Application: Going Past Halfway

By way of application, going past halfway . . .

1. . . . will call for spiritual vision.

Remember the Lord, He is awesome.

Martin Luther, the sixteenth century reformer, had been depressed for several weeks. One day his wife entered his study dressed completely in black. Martin Luther asked, “Who died?”

She said, “God has.”

He stood to his feet and bellowed, “God has not died.”

To which she lovingly responded, “Then live like it.”

Remember the Lord, He is awesome.

To every believer –

- Are you discouraged?

Remember the One who so agonized in prayer that He sweated drops of blood.

- Are you treated poorly or even rejected by some?

Remember the One who was despised, rejected, and, eventually, crucified by the ones He loved.

- Are you suffering in some way?

Remember the One who so often suffered that His nickname would be “Man of Sorrows”.

Remember the Lord, He is great and awesome!

Going past the halfway hurdles of life . . .

2. . . . will require stubborn faith.

And thirdly, going past halfway . . .

3. . . . will demand selfless assistance.

The people began to serve one another even more diligently.

- They worked until the stars came out, we are told in verse 21.
- They went without changing clothes, verse 23 tells us.
- They were willing to rally together and fight for each other.

Nehemiah and the people were rescued from the lure of the Red Dragon – the lure of discouragement. And, the people continued to build the walls of Jerusalem.

By the way, everyone is in the process of building walls. Some build a wall between themselves and others. Most tend to build walls around themselves. They build that tower high and thick, so on one can ever penetrate it. They are protected from the enemy. They have built a little shopping center in there. They have brought all of their toys in there. And, they have hooked a satellite dish to the side of their tall tower with 47,000 channels. They do not need anybody, and they do not live for anybody else. The truth is, if that is you, you do not need to be protected from the enemy, you have become your own enemy.

C. S. Lewis once wrote,

If you want to make sure of keeping your heart intact, you must give your heart to no one. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket – safe, dark, motionless – it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable.

The enemy knows that all too well. He baits his hook with discouragement and waits to see if some believer will take it and abandon the wall for his own private tower.

Rewriting the Principles

If we could rewrite the timeless truths learned in Nehemiah, chapter 4, that help us hurdle the halfway heartaches, it would simply be these:

- Refocus on what is important.
- Remember upon Whom you rely.
- Report for duty at the wall.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 5/7/2000 by Stephen Davey.

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