

Over the years of my life, I think I have realised that the biggest attack that I feel is when people criticise me, or attack my integrity. It tends to bring my life to a pause, and I find it really hard to regain momentum again. Alison always knows when there has been attack – my whole personality changes. Attacks from other people, the feeling of discouragement can suck the life out of us, can't it?

Maybe some of you have come to worship today and you are carrying with you some issue that is so discouraging – words said to you in the past, something that someone has done that has hurt. So today we are going to look at the causes and the cures for discouragement, and what to do when we feel like giving up.

So we are now on Nehemiah chapter 4. We've seen how Nehemiah has had a heart of desperation for the state of Jerusalem, as it lies in ruins. He knows he has to respond and so in chapter 2 we see that he is very honest with King Artaxerxes, who grants him all that he needs to go off to Jerusalem to begin the work of rebuilding the city. And then in chapter 3 that we haven't read, we see work beginning. But in the midst of all of this are a number of people who sit nagging and opposing what Nehemiah is doing. They are named in Chapter 2 as Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem.

Despite the naysayers, everything starts well in the building of the wall. They build it to about half its original height, but then the initial enthusiasm wears off, and then they become discouraged, because of a number of reasons.

So let's look at why the progress on the wall starts to turn a different direction. Look at verse 6, *'So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height'*. You see I think discouragement happens more than often when you are in the middle of something – we start off well but then something happens to change that. I can remember many years ago raising money for Christian Aid through a cycling challenge – about a 40 mile cycle. We were cycling from Larne back up towards Carrick. You may know the stretch as you come up towards Whitehead. In the car it might seem straightforward enough, but on the bike it's long, never ending and with a slight gradient. I can remember not being able to see the end of the road, and feeling like it was time to give up. I couldn't see where I had come from, I couldn't see where I was going. I was right in the middle, feeling very discouraged.

And so here's the first characteristic of discouragement today – **Discouragement comes when something takes longer than we expect it to**, and it causes us to **get tired**. Verse 10 we see that workers are tired – they can never see an end to building this wall. And for some of you today, you're tired. None of us can continue to operate effectively if we are exhausted, and yet this life pushes the boundaries constantly depriving us of sleep. But that is why God created the sabbath. He created a model where we have the chance to refocus our minds and souls on him, to be recharged, and yet how often do we try to press more and more juice out of that orange. That's not what we are designed for. It brings discouragement. When we are tired we are much more vulnerable to attacks of all kinds, including from other people. Criticism will always affect us more when we are tired. I know for me it is always bad to reply to criticism late at night when I'm tired.

So how are you being attacked right now? Is it coming as a result of you running around so much that you are not properly resting, you're not getting your sleep? Remember that discouragement will be more prevalent when things take longer than you expect it to – take time to rest and don't burn yourself out.

Discouragement also comes when life or a task gets complicated. You begin working on something and you find it's a lot harder than you expected it to be. So this then leads to **frustration**. At home, both Alison and I all our married life have not been good at throwing out paperwork. We get concerned that some documents are important to keep. So every so often I take the pile of papers sitting on our dining room table and try to sort them all. It's amazing how by the end it looks as though I haven't really got rid of as much as I hoped. It becomes very complicated and very frustrating because it looks as though I've not achieved. The people who were building the wall were getting very frustrated – the job was not as straightforward as they may have thought. In verse 10 we read, *'there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall'*. They get so frustrated with all the rubble around them.

All of us have some type of rubble in our lives. It could be that you have too many things going on in your life right now and you need to simplify. As a church I've been saying that I worry that the core issues of regular worship, study and prayer get lost for many people in the busyness of being involved in other things. Folks, if you are involved in other things within your life or within the church, and you haven't given proper time to those three things of worship, study and prayer, then you need to sort your rubble. Yes we all have stuff that piles up in life that we have to deal with, that's life, but we also need to clear out the rubble. The people became frustrated because all they could see was rubble – there needed to be a clearing out before the work of rebuilding could properly begin. For each of us we may need in this new season of RESET to evaluate our priorities and clear out some rubble – it might be activities, it might be relationships, attitudes. It's time to clear out – what's the rubble in your life right now? It's the stuff that keeps tripping you and I up, and because of it, it doesn't give you a clear sense of what God wants you to prioritise in your life. Today, tell the Lord about the stuff that's going on that seems so complicated to resolve. Pray Psalm 25:16 over it *"Turn to me and have mercy, for I am alone and in deep distress"*. God alone does not condemn your rubble – he wants to walk with you and help you see what needs to go in order that he can properly build you up.

So, we become discouraged when things take longer than we expect, we become discouraged when everything seems so complicated. Next **discouragement comes when we start to doubt our own abilities and this leads to a sense of us being a failure**. Let's look at that same verse 10 again *"the people said that there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall"*.

I'm the sort of person that always starts out very strong in anything I do. At the Alpha planning meeting the other evening we were talking through our hopes, and one of the things I said was that I am always the optimist. And I am, but as I get into the middle of something, when I realise the task is much harder than I thought, then doubt starts to set in, and I begin to give up. I feel the walls beginning to crumble, and it becomes an incredible fight to keep going at times.

Have you ever thought like that. Why did I take this job on? Why did I make that decision? I'm just going to give up. You start filling your head with feelings of failure. The people were not finishing the rebuilding in the time they hoped, and so they begin to lose heart.

So how do you handle failure? Do you start complaining? Do you start blaming other people? Do you take all the weight of failure on your shoulders. Instead of seeing it as a personal failure, why not treat it as an opportunity to grow and learn? I know over the last month as the trip to Nairobi began to reschedule, I had that feeling of my own failure, and yet God was doing a far bigger thing through it all. Instead of giving up, God was telling us to gather back stronger with a renewed emphasis on what we were trying to do. And actually I think now we feel we are moving in a better direction than maybe we were initially. The setback was a means to grow and learn to trust God more, not an opportunity to blame or feel as though we had failed.

Which now leads us to verse 11, our final area of discouragement when **it feels as though the opposition against you is getting stronger and threatens attack, and as a result it fills us with fear to stand firm.**

In the story of Nehemiah, we see that there are enemies of Jerusalem who have settled into the ruined city while the people have been away in Babylon. These people don't want to see a return of the Jews to the city. So how do they attack? Well first they criticise the builders, next they make fun of the builders and ridicule them, and then they try to threaten them with their lives. Verse 11 says *'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.'*

In many respects we all can deal with the fact that at times in life whatever we are involved in for the Lord, we are going to feel overwhelmed by the scale of the task, we might feel a failure. But when personal criticism, when unfounded allegations, threats, blackmail or verbal attack comes our way then it's hard to stand firm. It's interesting from our passage who the people are that feel such attack. Let's read Nehemiah's words in verse 12 *'Then the Jews **who lived near them came** and told us ten times over, 'Wherever you turn, they will attack us.'*

The people who were affected the most were the ones who were closest to the naysayers. Folks, if you keep company with negative people, if you keep hearing words from them that are not from God, if you choose to stay around those who do not understand the plans of God in your life, it is going to impact you with fear as they infiltrate your thinking. Some of us today need to stop filling our minds with all the stuff that brings us down – some of you need to walk away from those relationships that don't build you up, some of you need to step away from the social media or the stuff you watch on screens that is polluting your mind with the wrong attitudes, some of you need to pray that the people who are full of negativity the Lord will remove. Our passage says that it was those that were living closest to the enemy who were discouraged the most. We've got to turn away and hear a different voice. Sometimes the naysayers will continue to be around us, but that's why you need to have other positive to feed that mind of yours – that's why you need to drill in to a small group through the week, to the midweek communion, to the prayer time, surround yourselves with the people of God who will build you up.

The attack is very real, and therefore I worry that some of you are relying on your own strength to deal with the issues that you face in your life. Folks walk away from those things and those words of discouragement and walk into the arms of God – listen to God’s word that always builds your life. If you are listening to everything that is bad you and I will get discouraged, you will believe the threats, and become fearful.

Let’s therefore end with something of the answer - the motivation that will help us rebuild. Remember those words of the strength that comes from God alone - Philippians 1:6 *‘that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus’*. Remember that everything coming from God into your life will be encouragement not discouragement.

So let’s find the answer by looking again at Nehemiah.

Firstly in verse 13 he stationed some of the people behind the lowest points in the wall with swords, spears and bows. Notice that he didn’t give up on the job - he didn’t stop building - he just put some people to the task of defending, so that the work could go on. So folks, where God has plans for your life, don’t give up on it. But you may need to have others around you who you know are praying for you to ensure you are defended from the attacks that will come. Have you got a few friends who you know you can ask them to pray for you so you can keep moving forward? Who is encouraging you at this time. Maybe your action this week is to get into a small group so you know you have prayerful support. **So first point, don’t give up**

Secondly, like RESET, **focus back on God**. Verse 14 Nehemiah said to the frightened people, *‘don’t be frightened, remember the Lord who is great and awesome’*. God is greater than the opposition that you face. Remember God’s goodness to you, his faithfulness to you, and his power to equip you. How many people when they are rock-bottom turn their thoughts to the Lord? That’s where we need to go again. Folks if you are feeling the attack or the discouragement, turn back to the Word of God, turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth – the attacks, the discouragement, will grow strangely dim, in the light of his glory and grace.

Finally, **resist the attack**. You can’t give into it. Nehemiah in verse 14 says to the people *“fight for your families, fight for your sons and daughters, your wives, your homes”*. Folks, remember that we are in a constant spiritual battle. Satan our enemy wants to damage our self-belief, he wants to discourage you. His favourite weapons are distraction and discouragement. He wants you to be thinking of things other than God. He wants you to give up the fight. Even when you are fearful or when you think you are failing, don’t give up the fight. The battle belongs to the Lord.

As I come to an end, are there walls in your life that are half finished in their building? Are there relationships that are not fully mended today? Are there gifts that you have but you just keep putting off using them in the body? Maybe today you know that God is calling you into a relationship with him, to explore the Christian faith further but if you're honest you've never stepped across that line. Yes the wall of religion is built but it isn't complete without Jesus.

And so what changes can all of us make this week to ensure we are not discouraged? Do we need to re-evaluate what we are doing, do we determine to build rest into our lives, so we are not so frustrated? Do you need to simplify life so that your worship, your devotion, and prayer do not get pushed out? Is there rubble in your life that needs to be cleared out? If you have been feeling like a failure, remember that God loves you deeply, he forgives you unconditionally. Or is there worry about the negative words that are attacking you? God wants you in his strength alone to fight, don't give up, you don't have to listen to those negative thoughts. Don't give up, look up and see the Lord with you. Whatever is going on in your life, it will pass. God will go before you as you rebuild those walls.

Let me pray for you.

Father God, some of us today are feeling discouraged because of fear, or failure. Some are tired. Some are thinking it's more complicated, or people are attacking them. Help us to do what Nehemiah did – Pray this prayer over your own life. Lord today I want to refocus on you and remember your goodness to me, that you are for me. Lord today I resist the words of negativity or the thoughts that try to pull me into a low place. Give me the power of your spirit to fight for my life, my family, and my future. Remind me of those words in Romans 8 that if God is for me, who can be against me. I choose today to believe in your word and no one else's. Thank you Lord. Amen.