



We've been studying the book of Nehemiah and after reading chapter 4 I've come to see Nehemiah has a lot in common with Taylor Swift. You all know who she is, right? About a year ago she marked her transition from singing country music to pop music with the song, *Shake It Off*. This song was her response to her critics and detractors. Instead of letting their words get under her skin, she learned to shake it off. In the song, she says,

I stay up too late
Got nothing in my brain
That's what people say
That's what people say
I go on too many dates
But I can't make them stay
At least that's what people say
That's what people say
But I keep cruising
Can't stop, won't stop moving
It's like I got this music
In my mind, saying it's gonna be alright
Cause the players gonna play, play, play
And the haters gonna hate, hate, hate
Baby I'm just gonna shake, shake, shake
Shake it off
Heartbreakers gonna break, break, break
And the fakers gonna fake, fake, fake
Baby I'm just gonna shake, shake, shake
Shake it off, Shake it off

To be honest that's pretty good advice! If we're really sincere in following Christ, we will have our detractors. Becoming a Christian isn't like hopping on a luxurious cruise ship bound for heaven. It's more like climbing into an army tank and driving through enemy territory. There's a battle going on, and though we may know the ultimate winner, we've got a whole lot of fighting to do in the meantime! Christians have always identified the source of our conflict as the world, the flesh and the devil. The world is the order of humanity separated from God and in opposition to him. When the apostle John wrote, "***Do not love the world or the things of the world...***" that's what he was talking about. The flesh is our sinful human nature. It's the reason why selfishness comes so naturally to all of us. And lurking behind both the world and the flesh is the devil. His name means

slanderer. So our detractors are many, but we're called to shake it off. How do we do that?

This morning I want us to learn from Nehemiah. He'd left his comfortable life in Persia as the king's cupbearer to return to Jerusalem and lead his fellow Jews in rebuilding the walls around Jerusalem. But he encountered many detractors along the way, forcing him to constantly shake it off. In this book every significant advance made in the work was met by some form of opposition, which also became more intense as time went on. In Nehemiah 4 two strategies of attack are used against him, and they're still used today against us. The first is psychological, involving ridicule and scorn. The second is physical, involving threats of harm.

Opposition by Ridicule

Look at how chapter 4 opens up.

When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews, and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said, "What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble—burned as they are?"

Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, "What they are building—even a fox climbing up on it would break down their wall of stones!" (verses 1–3).

Sanballat and Tobiah, powerful and influential men, are behind this attack. Notice what got them so riled up. When Sanballat heard they were rebuilding the wall, he was furious. His ridicule is caused not by failure but by success. He's angry because the wall is actually being rebuilt. Nehemiah really does pose a problem and he's feeling threatened. You see, ridicule of this kind doesn't come because we're doing something wrong but because we're doing something right. We're a threat! I talk to many people who encounter opposition and assume it's because they're doing something wrong. But it's far more likely they're doing something right!

Notice also how they turn their anger into a public forum. Sanballat speaks in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria. He gets all these important people together and begins mocking what the Jews are doing. No doubt word would spread around the wall of what was being said about them by all the VIP's of Jerusalem. His purpose is to destroy the morale

of the workers. He asks a number of questions designed to chip away at their confidence and commitment. That's why ridicule is so effective. Through rumor, innuendo, sarcasm, and outright lies it strikes at an area where we already feel weak.

Listen again to their questions and see if any of these resonate with your own experience. First they ask, "What are these feeble Jews doing?" The Jews already felt feeble, but to hear someone else say it had to be demoralizing. Next they ask, "Will they restore their wall?" In other words, "Do they really understand the magnitude of what they've taken on?" Again, they were wondering themselves! Then they ask, "Will they offer sacrifices?" This was a sarcastic jab at their faith. What they mean is, "Are these fanatics going to pray the wall up?" Next they ask, "Will they finish in a day?" In other words, "Do they think it's just going to happen overnight? Do they know how long this will take?" Finally they ask, "Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble, burned as they are?" Stones that had been burned were crumbled and useless. This is an exaggeration since only the gates had been burned, not the walls. The enemy loves to exaggerate our weaknesses. To top it all off, Tobiah comes up with a one-liner; a joke meant to poke fun at the quality of their work, "If a little fox jumped on their wall it would break down," he says. Perhaps in their haste to get the wall up they weren't doing a quality job.

Isn't this how the enemy works—seeking to demoralize us and distract us from what's important through ridicule that's expertly crafted to stab us where it will hurt the most! It may come through a group of self-appointed critics in your life as it did for Nehemiah. Or it may come through an inner battle of your mind. He plays on our inner insecurities, our self-doubts, our fear of failing. Most of us feel these things to begin with and the enemy seeks to capitalize on them to paralyze us from going on. I know for me if I listened to all my doubts and insecurities, I'd be useless! Sometimes we wonder if it's God who's pointing these things out to us. But God doesn't work that way. God doesn't mock his children; it's the enemy. His work is to slander us and render us useless. If you're attempting to respond to the call of God, expect to be criticized.

How did this impact Nehemiah? The text doesn't tell us directly but we can read between the lines. Look at verses 4–5.

Hear us, our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders.

Do you detect some anger here? Besides demoralizing us, insults and ridicule make us mad. Anger in itself isn't wrong, but what we often do with our anger is wrong. Notice what he doesn't do with his anger; he doesn't take them on. He doesn't engage in verbal warfare. He doesn't say, "Okay, I'm going to take each point of your criticism and show you it's not true." That's what I'd do! I'd try to prove they're wrong and write a thesis in response. But Nehemiah doesn't waste his time on that. Instead he shakes it off by pouring his heart out to God. Don't you love his prayer? He

starts by asking God to hear their insults. It's like, "God, are you hearing this? Are you going to let this go on and on?" And then he gets into the good stuff. You can just hear the fury in his tone of voice. Basically he says, "Get 'em, Lord! Turn their insults back on them. Give them over for plunder. Don't cover up their guilt."

There are many prayers like this in the Old Testament. Our prayers seem so tame in comparison. How does this fit with what Jesus taught us about loving and forgiving our enemies, and praying for those who persecute us? One of the things we can say about this prayer and others like it is that it's honest, and God appreciates honesty. Nehemiah is really angry, and so why not express that to God? God can handle it, and if he wants to change it he can do that much better through us being honest than us trying to cover it up. God doesn't want us playing games in his presence, pretending we feel something we don't. And what a great way to vent your anger. It's better to express your wrath in prayer to God than in verbal or physical retaliation against your enemy.

So Nehemiah pours his anger into prayer. But that's not all he does. Look at v. 6.

So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart...

He and his fellow Jews also shake it off by pouring themselves back into the work to the extent the wall was built to half its height. I wonder if some of their anger was channeled into their work. Anger can energize work and it appears they allowed it to feed their determination to finish the job. I love how it says "the people worked with all their heart." It must have infuriated those sidewalk critics as they saw the mortar splash and the stones put into place. Don't spend yourself answering your critics; spend yourself talking to God about your critics and then go do what he's called you to do.

So attack number one, psychological pressure through ridicule, was shaken off by Nehemiah and his friends through prayer and recommitting to the work. But, in the second half of the chapter we see an even more dangerous form of opposition.

Opposition by Threat

Look at verses 7–8.

But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the people of Ashdod heard that the repairs to Jerusalem's walls had gone ahead and that the gaps were being closed, they were very angry. They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it.

When they heard how the breaches in the wall were being repaired they stepped up the opposition. Again, Sanballat and Tobiah head the list of those opposing the Jews. They're now joined by a number of others. Jerusalem was surrounded by a host of powerful enemies who agreed to invade Jerusalem and attack the workers. By human standards Jerusalem was out-matched. This was probably a covert operation since Nehemiah had official permission to rebuild from the king. They likely planned some kind of guerrilla warfare where they'd sneak up

on the city, surprise the builders, kill a few of them, and deny they had anything to do with it. However they planned to do it, news of it had quite an impact on the workers.

First, they began to get discouraged. Skip down to verse 10.

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.”

Somehow this threat of invasion took place right when it seemed like the work would go on forever. Reality was setting in. The immensity of the task before them coupled with the threat of invasion sent their spirits into a tailspin. They felt weary and buried in their work and couldn't even remember why they'd started. They began to believe the task was impossible. Have you ever felt that kind of discouragement when you're in the midst of a demanding task you know God wants you to do? Have you ever felt just plain weary or just so buried in your work you can't see past the rubble to the reason you took the job on in the first place?

But not only did they have to deal with discouragement, they also had to deal with fear. Look at verses 11 and 12.

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.”

Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, “Wherever you turn, they will attack us.”

They hear their enemies are planning a surprise attack. Then some fellow Jews from the surrounding areas came to warn them. Apparently they'd heard tell of an invasion. The fact they came ten times indicates what a panic they were in. It's likely they wanted the workers to stop the work and evacuate the city. They meant well, but they did the workers a disservice by their panicked counsel. Sometimes the most well meaning people can cause great harm. They thought their warning was helping the workers, but in fact it threatened to divert them from their work because it came from fear rather than faith. Fear is another surefire way to recognize the enemy's work. It doesn't have to be fear of physical threat. It can also be fear of failure or abandonment or embarrassment. Fear is a normal human reaction, but the enemy uses it when we allow fears to cloud our view of God, control us and move us into behavior that's compromising.

So Nehemiah and the workers are dealing with two of the enemies arrows: fear and discouragement. How do we shake that off? Nehemiah did four things.

First, he rallied the people to pray. Look back up at verse 9.

But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.

Earlier it was only him praying, but here he says, “we prayed to our God.” This was an urgent plea for help. Nehemiah had already prayed his enemies would be removed, but now they'd become even more of a threat! That's when it's hardest to pray, when you feel discouraged and afraid to begin with, and then you feel like God's not hearing you and you hear a whisper

saying, “He doesn't care; he's not there for you...” But that's when we need to pray most and that's when we need to rally others to pray with us.

The book *Deep Down Dark* by Hector Tobar tells the story of the 33 Chilean miners buried 2000 feet underground for over three months in 2010. They were trapped in a large space, including a room they called The Refuge. They had no idea if anyone would come for them. On August 5th, a Christian man named Don Jose Henríquez turned to a fellow miner named Mario and whispered, “God is the only way out of this.” Before the miners Mario announced, “Don José, we know you're a Christian man, and we need you to lead us in prayer. Will you?” From that moment forward Henríquez became known as “the Pastor” to his fellow miners because as soon as he began to pray it was clear he knew how to speak to God. He dropped to his knees and told the men to do the same. He began, “We aren't the best men, but Lord, have pity on us.” That simple statement struck several of the men hard. Víctor Segovia knows he drinks too much. Víctor Zamora is too quick to anger. Pedro Cortez thinks about the poor father he's been to his young daughter. Henríquez continues, “Jesus, let us enter the sacred throne of your grace. Consider this moment of difficulty of ours. We're sinners and we need you.” Just about everyone there was on his knees. They could sense that Henríquez knew this God he was talking to was God. Suddenly, the zeal many of them found annoying during a normal work day is exactly what they need. I think Nehemiah was a lot like Don Jose Henríquez. I think his prayers had that kind of impact on his fellow Jews.

But that's not all he did. He also took action and he did so in several ways. First, he prepared the people to fight. Look at verse 13.

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.

He set up a guard and he gathered family units armed with swords and bows and spears along an exposed place in the wall. He wanted to show the enemy they were ready to fight. This was the last thing the enemy expected. They expected these feeble Jews to run for their lives but instead they stood their ground!

He also took action as a leader by helping them regain their perspective. Look what he does in verse 14.

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, and fight for your families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes.”

He calls them to get their eyes off the enemy and on God. He's great and awesome. He's come through for them time and time again. Later, in v. 20 he says to them, “*Our God will fight for us!*” But that doesn't mean they can take a nap. Faith in God doesn't preclude fighting; instead it motivates us to fight. And he motivates them by reminding them what's at stake. Fight for your brothers, your sons and daughters, your wives and homes.

There's a lot at stake. I can't think of a time when this was ever more relevant than today. We live in a time when simply holding to the truth of God's word puts us in a position of being intolerant, unloving and narrow minded. But we mustn't ever forget what's at stake.

And finally, the last thing he did was resume the work. We don't have time to read it all but in verses 15–23 we see that although they carried on the work, they did so prepared for battle.

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 our own work.

From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armor. The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah who were building the wall. Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other, and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked (verses 15–18a).

Those who carried burdens did so with just one hand because in the other was a weapon. It's like they had a sword in one hand and a shovel in the other. The builders who needed both hands tied a sword to their belts. If you read on you'll see Nehemiah also devised a plan so that in case of attack they'd rally at the sound of a trumpet to fight. He even made a policy that at night-time everyone had to stay in the city dressed and ready for battle.

All of this shows us that part of shaking it off is to not stop doing what God has called you to do. Prayer is important, but we also need to stand our ground and fight. One of the ways we fight is by taking up what Ephesians calls "the sword of the Spirit," which is the word of God. Through the Word we regain our perspective that the God we serve is "great and awesome" and he'll fight for us. But the one thing we can't do is stop the work. Nehemiah wouldn't let fighting the enemy so preoccupy them that they stopped the work. He could have given his tired workers a month off, but he didn't. When facing the threat of invasion, he could have ordered a preemptive strike against the enemy, but he didn't. He took precautions against the enemy but he continued the work.

Few believers have encountered fiercer opposition than George Whitefield. He was the central preacher in the great evangelical awakening in the 18th century in Britain and North America. But he encountered a lot of opposition, mostly from other pastors. He was an Anglican but most Anglican churches were closed to him. They thought he was a little over the top. Three principles guided him in dealing with his critics. First, don't defend yourself. Second, don't engage in controversy. Third, don't stop preaching the whole gospel. In fact, when churches closed their

doors to him he'd just go outside into the open fields and preach to much larger crowds. He often preached to crowds of over fifty thousand people in the open air without microphones and loudspeakers. He'd come into a city and politely ask permission to preach in the local church. If they said yes, that's what he'd do. If they said no, he'd go outside, which was fine with him because it meant more people would hear the message. He had a goal: to proclaim the gospel fully and fearlessly. That goal was to him what building the wall was to Nehemiah. The slander and abuse he was subjected to never made him lose sight of it. If God has called you to do something, the enemy's chief aim is to get you to stop it. But you and I have to shake it off and do it! Don't give up.

History is filled with men and women who learned to shake it off and changed the world. But imagine if they'd given in to the paralyzing effects of ridicule and threats.

Imagine the apostle Paul, fearing resistance or rejection, choosing to stay home rather than embarking on the missionary journeys that took the message of Christ through the known world.

Imagine if fifty-six brave men, knowing they were committing treason, which was punishable by hanging, chose not to sign the Declaration of Independence. In the course of the Revolutionary War, five of them were captured by the enemy, twelve had their homes seized, two of their wives were abused by the British, one had two sons taken as prisoners of war, one saw his eldest son killed in combat, and seventeen lost everything they owned.

Imagine Malala Yousafzai passively quitting school because she was too frightened by the death threats she received from Taliban extremists, who abhor education for girls. Instead, she became even more vocal about the educational rights of children and women through a blog she started when she was 12 years old. In 2012 when she was 15 she barely survived an assassination attempt. And when she was 17 she won the Nobel Peace Prize. She now runs a chain of schools with her family in Pakistan.

Most importantly, imagine Jesus, fully aware of the cost of his mission to become the once-for-all sacrifice for the world's sin, deciding at the last minute to call down legions of angels to protect him. Instead, as Scripture says, "**When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly**" (1 Pt. 2:23).

Finally, imagine yourself, fully aware of the mission and vision God has placed in your heart to advance his kingdom in this world, yet unwilling to shake off ridicule, worry, and destructive fear. So take up your sword and fight the enemy through prayer and faith and the word of God, and take up your shovel and finish the work he's given you to do.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

© 2015 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA
Catalog No. 1413–5FC

This message from Scripture was preached on Sunday, July 5, 2015 at Central Peninsula Church
1005 Shell Boulevard | Foster City CA 94404 | 650 349.1132 | www.cpcweb.org. Additional copies available on request.