

Sword and Trowel

Nehemiah 4:7-23

A few weeks ago, we took a long, hard look at the problems that God's people faced as they were trying to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem. They faced the taunts of their opponents, which stung all the more because so many of them were true. The builders were clueless. They didn't have the proper raw materials for the job. The scope of the project was daunting – there really was so much rubble to clear away, so many burned stones to sort through.

And to make matters worse, they faced determined and increasingly organized foes: the people living all around them and their rulers, folks who had absolutely no interest in having a strong, vibrant city like Jerusalem restored in their midst. In short, a toxic combination of insults and threats had begun to demoralize the people, to weaken their resolve.

Today we see how Nehemiah stepped in, leading by example as well as by sheer force of character. Much like George Washington did during that terrible winter at Valley Forge, Nehemiah shared the privations and dangers of his people – even sleeping in his clothes so he would be ready for an attack at a moment's notice. He rallied the people, and got them back on task.

And so it would be very easy for us to read this passage the way we read a comic book, looking for someone with superpowers to swoop in and save the day. It would be all too easy to draw the conclusion that if we only had a leader like Nehemiah, everything would work out alright for us. And maybe that would be the case – if we had the same kind of task before us and the same sort of opponents ranged against us. If we had a physical wall to build and were surrounded by hostile tribes of ancient enemies who were trying to destroy us with attacking armies we'd need someone exactly like Nehemiah to do exactly the sorts of things that he did.

But let's face it – that's not anywhere close to our current situation. We're not trying to build a wall with stones and mortar. No, we're called to build the Kingdom of God, encouraging one another to greater faith and love, and calling new people to receive Jesus as Savior and bow the knee to Him as Lord. And as we saw a few weeks ago, our opponents are much harder to see, if no less real. For the rubble around us are the broken lives of those who have placed their faith in wealth or power or happiness, only to be disappointed by others who are seeking their own pleasure instead of the welfare of others. And the forces that keep us from building are not facing us outside a half-built wall but are instead all too often found within our very hearts: Anxiety, bitterness, complacency, despair – you can go through the whole alphabet of ways we express our failure to trust in God's love and power. The bottom line is that it is hard work to swim upstream against an increasingly godless and self-centered culture, and perhaps even harder to fight against the sinful tendencies in ourselves.

So, what can we learn from today's passage that will help us overcome our obstacles? What did Nehemiah and his folks do that will help us build the Kingdom of God where we are, in this little corner of Southwest Mississippi?

In the first place, we can't deny that good leadership is essential. Good leaders maximize our efforts through coordination and organization. Aside from the good example he set for his people, look at all the things Nehemiah did – in verse 9, he set up a guard to keep watch for enemy attacks. And in verses 18 and 20, he set up a system to warn people about those attacks – a man with a trumpet that

could be heard all over the city would set the defenses in motion. Nehemiah's command and control procedures would help the people ward off any possible attack.

And good leadership does the same sort of thing today, helping to defend us against all sorts of threats. For example, the whole Presbytery examines prospective ministers – to make sure they know the Scriptures, to make sure that they love Jesus and love their people, to make sure they are truly prepared to help lead our congregations. Similarly, the General Assembly spends a lot of time formulating position papers and pastoral letters on a wide variety of problems currently facing our society – so we can bear united witness, thoughtfully speaking the truth in love. And let's not forget how our General Assembly staff has worked so hard to support Andrew Brunson, one of our Teaching Elders who is languishing in a Turkish prison – they are doing the best they can to defend him against false accusations. Our leaders work together to defend us from error and from the dangers of sin wherever it lies.

But our leaders also help us move the kingdom of God forward, just as Nehemiah's defensive plans allowed the building of the wall to proceed. When the 600 churches of the EPC gather in General Assembly, we decide on the strategic mission of the whole denomination – the need to plant new churches and revitalize existing ones, the need to spread the gospel throughout the globe, especially in places where the church has a tenuous foothold, the need to defend religious freedom everywhere. The National Leadership Team then helps identify trustworthy resources to help us meet these objectives. And of course the Presbytery gathers three times a year to do similar things on a smaller scale.

And what does all this organization and coordination make possible? The General Assembly sponsors training events, mentorships and group encouragement for church planters. They support the resources of the GO Center, which helps congregations grow through embracing a mission-centered mindset. World Outreach recruits, trains and commissions missionaries who are prepared to do cross-cultural missions. And the Presbytery takes advantage of these resources, channeling the efforts of our 50 churches to make a much bigger impact than any of us can do alone. We are supporting a field team in our Engage 2025 project. We are planting churches in Austin, New Braunfels, and Katy, Texas, and in New Orleans, Louisiana. We are supporting and encouraging 16 candidates who are preparing for the gospel ministry. Simply put, the leadership our General Assembly and Presbytery provides makes it possible for us to make a much bigger impact than any single congregation could do by itself.

But the same thing is true on a smaller scale within our congregation. The ruling elders meet with prospective members to make sure that their profession of faith is credible and that they understand the responsibilities of church membership. The elders help determine the particular missions that our congregation needs to support, as well as developing ministries that will equip all of us to do the hard work of building the kingdom.

And that leads to our second point. For if good leaders maximize our efforts through coordination and organization, all of the members of the church must be involved in every aspect of the work if anything is going to get done.

In Nehemiah's time, that meant dividing the work between guards and workers – verse 16 says they took turns working on the wall and holding the weapons. But verses 17 and 18 say that even those actively engaged in building had a weapon close at hand – burden bearers carried one and masons, who

doubtless needed both hands free, had a sword at their side while they spread mortar with a trowel in their hands.

What does all this mean for us modern American Presbyterians? Simply this: all of us are called, in one way or another, both to defend the faith and to build the Kingdom, as we spread the truth of the gospel. Now, this is going to take different forms for different congregations. We may not be large enough to plant a new church ourselves, but we can partner with other congregations in the presbytery to support a church plant in a growing area. We may not be large enough to meet all the social needs there are in our area, but we can partner with other congregations or ministries to help show and share the love of Jesus Christ.

And the same thing is true on an individual level. History has shown us that we cannot leave the defense of the truth or the advancement of the Kingdom to those in professional ministry. We cannot let the preachers make all the decisions – America alone is littered with church colleges, seminaries, and denominations that have succumbed to worldliness on the advice of so-called experts. No, each of us must learn more of the gospel, more about Jesus and His Word so each of us can share that truth with our neighbors. In the same way, because we all have different neighbors with different needs, we all have different opportunities to demonstrate the love of Christ in concrete ways, not just inviting folks to church, but inviting folks into our homes, into our lives. For let's face it: you can't defend the truth unless you know it. You can't love someone at arm's length. If the folks in Nehemiah's time couldn't build a wall without both a sword and a trowel, we can't build the Kingdom of God without both truth and love.

But there's one more lesson we can learn from today's passage, and it's really the most important one. For if we need leaders to help us get organized and coordinated, and if we all need to get busy defending the faith and building the Kingdom of God wherever we are and however we can, we also need to rely completely on God for the results of all our efforts.

Nehemiah and his folks certainly did this, didn't they? We already saw back in verses 4 and 5 that the people cried out to God to do justice, and in verse 9 to protect them from all the attacks of the enemy. And that same sort of prayer needs to form the backdrop of our lives. All 600 EPC churches put together don't have the power or the influence to get Andrew Brunson out of prison, but God can. None of us as individuals can protect ourselves from the spiritual enemies all around us, none of us has the power to turn off all the anxiety, the bitterness, the complacency, the despair – all of the alphabet soup of problems that paralyze us, that keep us isolated, that prevent us from reaching out with the love and truth of Jesus Christ, but God can. If we aren't praying for God's justice, if we aren't praying for God's protection, if we aren't praying that God would pour out His Holy Spirit into our hearts and the hearts of our neighbors, nothing else we can say or do can possibly have any effect on the world around us.

No, we must rely on God in the same way that the folks did in Nehemiah's time. In verse 14, he reminded the people that it is the Lord Who is great and terrible, great and awesome. In verse 20, he said that even if worst came to worst, even if their enemies fell upon them with all their strength, they had no reason to fear. And why? "Our God shall fight for us."

And that's exactly what happened in this passage, in such a subtle way that we may have missed it in our reading. Look back at the middle of verse 15. No matter what the enemies of God's people

may have planned, no matter how fierce their hatred may have been, “God had brought their counsel to nought.” God frustrated their plans. God protected His people, just as He protects us today.

Ah, but how did God do this? Look at the beginning of verse 15 – what frustrated the plans of God’s enemies was the fact that God’s people learned the truth about their plans. And because they knew that truth, the leaders of God’s people formed a defensive strategy and God’s people bought into it, playing defense as well as offense, carrying both sword and trowel, defending themselves at the same time that they kept busy building the wall. In other words, God displayed His mighty power by setting His people in motion, allowing their work to accomplish His purposes. God defended His people with their own organization and hard work.

And the same thing is still true for all of us today. With a society crumbling around us, with a church that needs to be built of the living stones of followers of Jesus Christ, there can be no shirkers among God’s people. We must all follow our leaders in the good example they set for us, participating in the opportunities for ministry they provide for us. But we can’t stop there. We must also take advantage of every opportunity we have to learn more of the truth about Jesus. We must set our hands to whatever work God places before us, showing and sharing the love and truth of Christ with all those around us. We must be steadfast and constant in prayer that God’s will would be done in our lives, in our community, and in our world.

But as we follow and as we work and as we pray we can be sure that God is at work – some way, somehow. Even in the midst of the rubble all around us, even in the face of the stiffest opposition, even in our times of greatest need, God is with us. So let’s trust Him. And let’s get to work.