

Series: Transforming the World in which God has Placed Us

VBC

Pastor John Johnson

November 19-20, 2005

Nehemiah 4:7-23

“The Importance of Keeping Your Clothes On”

I was at Evangelical Theological Society meetings this week, where professors of Christian seminaries meet to discuss the theological issues of the day

- And hundreds of papers are read, keeping most spellbound
- Some of my favorites:
 - *The Discovery of Pepouza: The Long-Lost ‘Vatican’ of the Montanist Movement*
 - *Whatever Became of Phoebe Bartlett?*
 - *The Art and Literature of Christian Nubia*
 - *Do P. Oxy 655 and Codex Sinaiticus Prove an Error in Jesus’ Words at Matt 6:28?*
 - *The Exegetical Significance of the Athnac*
- No wonder the church is in trouble

We’ve been focused on a story in Scripture of a people who also were in *trouble*

- A people attempting to carry out the will of God and were facing mounting resistance
 - This generally happens when people get serious about God
 - Give your life to Jesus, re-commit your life to live Christ, determine to respond to His holy call, and all hell seems to break loose
- Part of what is great about God’s word is that it keeps this fact in front of us
 - As a warning, as instruction, that we not become disheartened, or deceived
 - That we know what to do when faced with such resistance (READ 4:7-23)
- It’s here that some rules seem to stand out
- First, the obvious...
 - 1) WAKE UP - WE’RE IN A WAR
 - God’s people have been summoned to something bigger than themselves
 - And hell is breaking loose
 - There are enemies in their story (verses 7-8)
 - As there are in our story

A) Recognizing we are in a war helps us make better sense of life

- Why certain dreams bring fear or temptation
- Ordinary worries take on extraordinary power
- Certain attractions become compulsions
- Certain people become hostile
- Why marriages fight, churches divide

B) Knowing we are in a war means that we must see ourselves differently

- Nehemiah makes it clear to these artisans, priests, temple servants, family members, perfume makers (chapter 3) that they will have to be more than masons and brick layers and rubbish collectors and wall builders
- Given the situation, they will also have to be soldiers (verse 13)
- And whether we realize it or not, whether we are engineers, teachers, salesmen, construction workers, stay at home parents, we will have to wear the same uniform
 - In order to deal with this long assault on our souls
 - A struggle that will not end until Christ brings us into its absence

C) To live in ignorance of this is one of the most dangerous things we can do

- It's to live life in a vulnerable condition
- Eldridge puts it this way: "It's like skipping through the worst part of town, late at night, waving your wallet above your head. It's like walking into an Al-Qaeda training camp wearing an 'I love the US' T-shirt. It's like swimming with great white sharks, dressed as a wounded sea lion."
- We will get killed!!
- And yet, all too many live oblivious
- How many of us are conscious of this war on a daily basis?
- How many practice spiritual warfare as a normal, daily part of the Christian life?

Point - This is the first rule, for you can't fight a battle that's existence you are not aware of

- You can't win a battle you ignore

2) WATCH OUT - THERE ARE MULTIPLE FRONTS (verse 7)

- In verse 7, it is clear the enemies have increased
- Coming from every angle
- And it is as if Nehemiah has described these four to make the point
 - Sanballat from the north (Samaria)
 - Tobiah from the east (Ammon, which had a foothold on the western bank)
 - Arabs from the south (the Negev)
 - Ashdodites from the west (the area where the Philistines lived)
- Enemies literally "bound together" to fight and keep the wall from going up (verse 8)

APPLICATION - We too are surrounded by a number of enemies

- That seem to come, no - they do come, from all directions
- A triad of enemies, world, flesh, devil
 - Flesh: The sphere of evil desires and lusts, especially our affections that work within
 - World: Culture - with its distorted values
 - Devil: Perhaps the most subtle of all, evil spirits that work to empower our desires
- Together they gang up to battle anyone who would, for a single moment, intend to live a life centered on God
- Tirelessly disputing the supremacy of the Spirit
- With an aim of disordering the soul, disintegrating the character
- Which leads to the third rule

3) LOOK OUT - THERE ARE VARIOUS STRATEGIES

- A) Ridicule and contempt (verses 1-3)
- B) Confusion, create a climate of chaos, darkness, with the aim of depleting (verse 8)
- C) Discouragement (verse 10)
 - That often comes at the halfway point
 - It was enough just to build the wall, they also had to contend with the massive ruins that had collected the debris of 140 years
 - And they were tempted to despair, give out, literally "totter, stagger."

APPLICATION - Most of us are well acquainted with this attack

- There is a certain weariness in well doing that sets in, as Paul puts it in Galatians 6:9

- D) Intimidation, fear, insecurity (verse 11)

E) Uncertainty, doubt (verse 12)

- From another angle, there were the doubts and fears of the broader community
- Spreading rumor, arousing fears
- Come home, things were better without the wall

- What all of these have in common is a desire to rob us of our peace, of our hopes, TO ROB US OF OUR LIVES

- Karl Barth, a theologian during the dark days of Germany in the 30's came to understand evil in a profound way
 - Evil is NOTHINGNESS
 - It exists as something wholly negative
 - It cannot create, only feed on or destroy
 - It cannot construct, only deconstruct
 - It cannot offer anything, for it is nothing
 - It can only distort what already is
 - CS Lewis, "evil is hijacked goodness"

 - To put it another way, evil has a parasitic nature to it
 - It draws its energy from that which exists
 - It draws its life from the living creation on which it trades (*A Theology of the Dark Side*, Wright)
 - Which was the case in this story
 - And is the case in our story
 - Sin never gives, it only takes
 - Be it pornography or greed or gossip, it never adds to our lives, for it has nothing in and of itself to give
 - This is why we must resist
 - For not only are we drained, we give life to something that is nothing
 - That is, we boost sin when we give in
 - To resist is to dis-empower

- So how do we fight?

Here is the most important rule of all

4) LOOK UP - FIGHT WITH SPIRITUAL WEAPONS

- Nehemiah was not about to be intimidated, to be pushed off page
- This is what makes him a hero in my book
- Filled with a holy discontent, a holy prayer, a holy nerve, a holy conviction, a holy imagination, a holy indignation, and now – A HOLY TENACITY
- He refused to be drawn to evil nor mastered by it
- Rather, Nehemiah took on evil, as we must take on evil, with two powerful weapons

A) AUTHORITATIVE INTERCESSION (verse 9)

- An invisible war requires work in the invisible
- Prayer is work in the invisible realm
- It is the process in which history is formed
- The kingdom of God advances, the kingdom of darkness diminishes
- And the world moves towards God's ultimate goals

The second weapon is

B) DIVINE TRUTH

- Nehemiah fought off evil with these essential truths, that are our truths

1. Evil has no authority over us (verse 14)

- HAS NOTHING OVER US
- In fact, it is just the opposite, it is we who have authority over it
- Having been given this authority by God (Mark 3:15)
- Sin only has the power we give it

2. God is more than ABLE (verse 14)

- He is able to do whatever He wills to do
- If He gives the devil any rope, it is always just enough to hang himself

3. God enters into and fights our battles (verse 20)

- Prayer and truth won the day (verse 15)
- The enemy's efforts were frustrated, as they will be when we resist with prayer and truth

But there is one more truth

4. Sin is never less quiet than when it is most quiet

- We fight an enemy whose strength is secret, whose presence is hidden
 - When we think sin is destroyed, it is merely out of sight
- So Nehemiah required a trowel in one hand, a sword in the other
- And the orders to never take off your clothes (verse 23)
- The enemy ever lurks

In Krakow, every hour a sentinel still blows the horn. Halfway through it ends, as it did the day the Tartars from the East invaded and struck the sentinel half way through his warning, to remind Poland to be ever vigilant; that someone from the outside might intrude.

We must maintain the same vigilance

- We are in a war, from multiple fronts, with multiple strategies

But in Christ, we have won the war