



GUARD DUTY

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Back in 1975, I walked into a department store with my mother and saw the craziest thing my nine year old mind could imagine. There on a table was a display of brown cardboard boxes with handles on top and small holes punched in it. And on the side of the box, big bold letters told you what was inside: a pet rock.

When you opened the thing up, there was a very ordinary looking rock, sitting on a bed of straw, with an owner's manual, explaining how to care for and train your rock. It didn't need much food or water. Potty training was a cinch. You couldn't teach it to speak or roll over, but with a little help from you, you could teach it to become an attack rock.

For the life of me, I could not figure out why anybody would pay good money on a rock they could walk outside and pick up for free. That was long before my career in advertising, and I didn't understand the power of good packaging. Because really, the appeal wasn't the rocks – it was the message that went with the rocks. Someone very creative had reimagined worthless rocks and created a new way to see them.

There's got to be some substance to the message, though, and after about six months, all the grown-ups caught on to what kids had known all along. The pet rock fad died out quickly, because a clever marketing scheme can only take you so far.

But ordinary rocks can have potential. When we last left Nehemiah, he had been staring at piles of rocks that everyone thought were worthless. They were the remainders of Jerusalem's broken down wall. Nobody much cared for those rocks because they represented failure and disappointment.

But Nehemiah looked at them differently. He saw a future in them, reimagining them as a new wall. But unlike pet rocks, his idea wasn't a fad or a slick marketing ploy to motivate people – it was a God-given vision of what those rocks could once again become.

Nehemiah showed the people of Jerusalem how to shift their focus from what they couldn't do to what God COULD and WOULD do through them. They had a calling and

a mission, and Nehemiah won over their hearts. They threw themselves into the rebuilding effort, ready to tackle what God had given them.

We all have been called by God to join him in his great rebuilding effort, restoring lives and relationships. Our whole premise for this study is that God has work for us to be doing, too, both individually and as a church.

Maybe that doesn't really feel like it applies to you directly. You might think, "I have no clue what God is wanting me to do. I can't really see how he could use me for anything."

If that's you, I want to encourage you to spend some time reading through Nehemiah, especially chapter 3. We're not going to spend our time there this morning, but I point it out because in it, Nehemiah goes through and lists out the names of people according to which section of the wall they worked on. And as I read through it, two thoughts struck me. Number one was that it didn't matter who you were in Jerusalem, there was a place for you on the wall. Men and women worked on it. Priests and soldiers and government officials. It lists perfume makers of all people, and goldsmiths and shopkeepers all side by side. It involved everyone because everyone had a stake in the outcome. And no matter who you are, you have a stake in what God is doing today.

The second thing I noticed in chapter 3 was how often it said something like this:

Nehemiah 3:23

Beyond them, Benjamin and Hasshub made repairs in front of their house; and next to them, Azariah son of Maaseiah, the son of Ananiah, made repairs beside his house.

People were working on sections of the wall near where they lived. In other words, the work was right there in front of them! All they had to do was look around their front door to see what needed to be done.

If you want to know what God has for you to do, start with where you're at and look around. You don't have to wait for some earth shattering revelation. Where has God placed you now? There is work to be done for him right there, work restoring lives and giving him glory.

The people of Jerusalem fully embraced their new calling. There was energy and hope and excitement as they moved forward. Things were finally starting to look up. But there were some clouds on the horizon. Old enemies were not pleased with what they saw happening.

Nehemiah 4

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-if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones!"

Hear us, O 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.

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

But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the men 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. But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.

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."

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."

The definition of friction is "a force that resists movement and dampens energy." Leonardo da Vinci was one of the first people to study it in depth, and he came up with a law of friction that is still considered true today. He said if the load of an object is doubled, its friction will also be doubled. In other words, a full suitcase sliding down a chute at the airport will meet twice as much friction as an empty suitcase the same size. The more weight and pressure bearing down, the greater the resistance will be.

There is also friction on a social and spiritual level, and the same law seems to apply. Sanballat didn't much care for the Jews in Jerusalem, but it was when they began building their wall back up that the friction increased. The very fact that they were making more progress is what produced the greater resistance. There was more weight behind what they were doing, which resulted in more friction.

The more we throw ourselves into the things God cares about, the more we can expect to be targeted by the enemy. Make no mistake: Beyond the trials and tribulations of daily life, there is a spiritual battle going on that we're normally oblivious to. But if we make any movement toward God, it will almost always produce resistance. J.I. Packer says, "When God initiates something for his praise, Satan is always there, trying to keep pace with him, planning ways of spoiling and frustrating the divine project."

The devil is real, and he hates anything that will make God look good. You may not think he would pay any attention to what you're up to, but the minute you start to care about honoring God with your life, you become a target for his attacks. Even though Sanballat is just human, he gives us a vivid picture of exactly the approach Satan takes in his attacks. Look at the messages the people of Jerusalem were pounded with:

Message #1: You're no good. – He calls them feeble Jews. They're not good enough to build the wall. He makes them feel weak. Forget the fact that they had survived captivity. Forget the fact that they had been strong enough to make the long trip back from exile. Forget the fact that they were standing back up after getting knocked down time and time again. The message "You're feeble. You're no good," was a lie, but one that hit its mark.

The devil would have us feel like we're too weak to think God could work through us. Forget what God has already done – it's a lie that sounds right. So we buy it and start to feel that God could never really love us, let alone work through us.

Message #2: You can't win this. – Sanballat pointed out the obvious. The wall was huge. The materials they had to work with were damaged. How in the world could they possibly hope to accomplish it? Logically, it made more sense to give up. Why waste energy on something you'd never finish?

Do you ever feel like the problems around you are so big that anything you do won't be enough? Are you overwhelmed and paralyzed by the size of the task? That is a spiritual battle you are fighting. Because God has specifically said he won't put you in a spot you can't handle.

1 Corinthians 10:13

All you need to remember is that God will never let you down; he'll never let you be pushed past your limit; he'll always be there to help you come through it.

But when you're in the thick of it, that's a hard truth to remember, and the devil's arguments sound pretty convincing.

Message #3: What you do doesn't matter. Even a little fox would knock this wall down if it climbed on it. You're pouring all this time and energy into something that won't last.

That's a biggie. It takes so much out of us when we pour ourselves into someone else's life, and all too often, we can't see it making any difference. Years ago, Karin mentored a couple of teenage girls for months. She invested heavily in them. Then they both went off the deep end, choosing to rebel against everything Karin had tried to instill in them. It was really discouraging for her, making her question why she had bothered. It wasn't until years later that they both began to get their life back on track and one of them said, "You were my best friend through high school." Karin had no idea from the response she was getting while she was working with her.

That's where Satan loves to point and say, "See? You're wasting your time." When you don't have God's timetable in front of you or his perspective where you can see how everything fits together, it's hard NOT to feel discouraged when your efforts go unrewarded.

Message #4: You're too tired. The people literally hit a wall. They reached a point of physical exhaustion and burnout where they had nothing left. They were ready to give up. All of a sudden, the rubble looked like too much. Whereas before it seemed doable, when they were exhausted everything seemed impossible.

We have told our kids many times that things always seem worse at night. When you're tired and about ready to go to bed, the next day can seem unbearable. The fatigue is real – there's nothing spiritual about that. But Satan likes to pounce on us when we're feeling that way, because we're at our most susceptible when we don't feel we have the strength to fight it anymore. He wants to turn our exhaustion to his advantage.

Are you feeling like its night, and things are looking worse because you're so tired?

Isaiah 50:10

*Let him who walks in the dark, who has no light,
trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God.*

Message #5. You're on your own. Sanballat and his friends tell the Jews, "Before you know it, you're going to look around and we'll be surrounding you on all sides. You won't even see us coming, but we'll be right next to you."

You can feel incredibly isolated as a Christian. Just look around: If you make a conscious choice to live for God, you will find very little support in the culture around you. Based on what you see in the media or in public, it doesn't look like ANYONE else is making the same choice.

This was the barrage of messages the good citizens of Jerusalem had to deal with, and it is the same assault we face today. The devil is very predictable, but he uses these messages because they work.

Now about at this point, you might be thinking, "Yeah, thanks a lot. Now I REALLY feel discouraged." Who would want to choose this path, knowing that the further you go along, the more opposition you're going to encounter? Life is hard enough without having to worry about spiritual adversaries.

I'm sure the people of Jerusalem felt the same way. Wall building is grueling work all by itself. Add the presence of someone shouting threats in your ear and it becomes almost unbearable.

This is where I love Nehemiah. Before you despair and abandon all hope, you have to take a look at how he responded.

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.

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 brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes."

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 his own work.

Someone should make a movie of this part, because you can just picture this whole scene. It's a better speech than the one William Wallace gave in Braveheart or what Aragorn said at the Black Gate in Lord of the Rings.

Nehemiah has this complete confidence as he stands in front of the people and shouts. Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord who is great and awesome. That is our hope! That is the key to surviving these attacks – remembering who God is. I lose sight of that all the time. What a relief it is to hear that truth in the middle of a struggle. When you feel beat down, remember the Lord who is great and awesome. When the problems are overwhelming, remember the Lord who is great and awesome. When you're afraid, remember the Lord who is great and awesome.

This is why we say worship is central. It calls us back to the core of our faith. The one who has invited us to his table is the one who holds the stars in his hands and who rides on the wind and who devastates his foes with a glance.

We sometimes think and act like we live in a universe where good and evil are equal opposing forces, but they're not. Satan is no match for God and we give him far too much credit when we let the problems he brings loom larger than God.

Some of the high schoolers may recognize this thought from A.W. Tozer. It's quoted in the Crazy Love book they're reading for small group. Tozer said,

What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us...For this reason, the gravest question before the church is always God himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like.

What kind of God do we believe in? He's not wringing his hands in heaven, helpless against the devil's jabs. He's great and awesome and powerful and supreme. He is bigger and smarter and truer than Satan can ever be, and he has already secured ultimate victory through what Jesus did on the cross. Satan fights on, but he is a defeated enemy.

Satan wants us to forget that. He wants us to forget who God is. But when we expose what he is trying to do and we choose to hold fast to the truth about God's character, the

devil's efforts lose steam. Nehemiah says when their enemies knew they were found out, they had to back off. God frustrated their plans, and he will frustrate our enemy's plans as well.

Nehemiah says when the battle gets heavy, we need to remember the Lord who is great and awesome. And then he tells the people to also remember why they're in it:

and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes.

This fight, he says, is personal. It's not about some construction projects. It's not about re-stacking a bunch of rocks to make a wall. No – what's at stake are the people you love and want to protect. This fight is for everyone you're in relationship with, everyone you care about. You can feel the intensity in every one of Nehemiah's words. This fight can't be half-hearted because too much is on the line.

When we talk about the great work God has called us to do, we don't mean some mysterious, spiritual task he will put on your heart. We're talking about the one way Jesus said people will know we're with him, and that's by loving each other.

We are to fight for one another. Fight for families. Fight for marriages. Fight for souls who are dried up and dying for lack of knowing Jesus. I don't want to sit around and play church when so much is at stake.

Jude 22-23

Be merciful to those who doubt; snatch others from the fire and save them.

People are playing with fire and don't know it. What are you and I doing to intervene? The devil would like to lull us into thinking there's no rush to be about the business of God, but it is urgent. Too much is on the line.

Nehemiah then got extremely practical to address the situation:

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...

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. But the man who sounded the trumpet stayed with me.

Then I said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "The work is extensive and spread out, and we are widely separated from each other along the wall. Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!"

So we continued the work with half the men holding spears, from the first light of dawn till the stars came out. At that time I also said to the people, "Have every man and his helper stay inside Jerusalem at night, so they can serve us as guards by night and workmen by day." Neither I nor my brothers nor my men nor the guards with me took off our clothes; each had his weapon, even when he went for water.

I love the image of these workers with a shovel in one hand and a sword in the other. They were not going to let the attacks keep them from their work, but they were smart about it and were ready to defend themselves.

As we try to wrap our minds around what it looks like to be ready for our own battles, we've got to be smart about it, and I think there are three simple things we can take from the people's actions in this story that can give shape to our own strategy.

Get in place.

Nehemiah looked at the wall and found where the low points were, the openings where they were most vulnerable to attack. And that's where he concentrated his efforts. That's where he posted a guard.

Where are your own low points? Where are you most vulnerable to attack? There are weak points in your relationships, places where you are most tempted to sin. I don't know about you, but I try to ignore those places. They just remind me of my own weakness and where things aren't going well. I want them to go away. But they won't go away by pretending they don't exist. We need to be vigilant in those areas, concentrating on shoring them up.

David knew one potential weak spot for himself was his words, so he prayed

Psalm 141:3

*Set a guard over my mouth, O LORD;
keep watch over the door of my lips.*

If you know you're prone to say things you shouldn't, you don't have to just accept it as part of your charm. If you're getting in trouble with your anger, don't dismiss it – get jealous. If your eyes are going where they shouldn't, don't make excuses – put some safeguards in place. Get an accountability partner and change your habits. If you're more concerned with keeping other people happy than with pleasing God, if your thoughts are dominated by your fears, if you're harboring a grudge against someone...these are all areas we tend to let go, but where we need to post a guard.

A rain barrel can only hold water as high as its lowest slat. If you want it to hold more, you need to raise that slat. In the same way, our spiritual growth can only grow as far as the lowest point in our wall. If we want to grow more, we need to identify and confess those low spots and be prepared to deal with them.

Get equipped.

Secondly, everyone Nehemiah worked with picked up some armor and weaponry. They knew there were tools that were necessary for any chance of success. Just being in the right place wouldn't be enough – they had to be prepared.

We could take another whole sermon right here and talk about the armor of God, but for now, we'll just say this: you can't go into this battle unequipped. You need the sword of the Spirit – God's word. You need the shield of faith. You need that helmet of salvation. I was talking with someone just the other day who is going through some struggles, and it made her realize she needed more "battle gear" to make it. So she was surrounding herself with people who could give her spiritual counsel and looking to Scripture for wisdom. That's getting equipped.

Beth Moore says she used to feel apologetic for encouraging people to memorize Bible verses, but not anymore, because she's found that nothing else has the power to help them in the same way. We have to put on the full armor of God as Paul says, so that we'll be able to hold our ground. What piece of armor am I missing right now?

Get engaged.

Nehemiah told the people, "Look. We're spread out and separated from each other. So when you hear the sound of the trumpet, come running to that place. When you hear that someone is in need, get there fast and join the fight."

This is a call to arms this morning. When you see somebody else struggling, that's a trumpet calling you to engage. When you notice a brother or sister who isn't doing well, come along side them. Don't assume somebody else has it covered. If you're close enough to see the need, you may be the closest person to respond.

The best part is what Nehemiah says happens when we join together in that way:

Our God will fight for us!

As we step out in faith and obedience to God's call, we find that he meets us there in ways we never imagined. It isn't that it's up to me to rescue every hurting person out there. Jesus is the Savior – not me. When you and I overcome our fears or laziness or pride and get involved with God's work, he comes in power and works through us.

Where are you at with the battle this morning? Some of you need to get in place and pay attention to the low spots in your life. You know where your defense is down, where you've let down your guard and you're vulnerable. Maybe you're feeling the need to get equipped. You need the right tools to defend yourself against the enemy's attacks. Or maybe you've been sort of sitting on the sidelines. You haven't been fully committed to this Jesus thing, but now you know it's time to get engaged. It's too important to just dabble with.

Wherever you are at -- Don't be afraid. Remember the Lord who is great and awesome. Our God is fighting for us.