

“Confronting Your Coyotes”

Nehemiah 4:1-23

Series: The Story – Chapter 21 Rebuilding the Walls

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Lexy Lowler had a problem. Like many sheep ranchers in the West, she tried just about everything to stop crafty coyotes from feasting on her sheep. Odor sprays, electric fences, even “scare-coyotes” proved ineffective against these night time marauders. She slept with her lambs during the summer and placed battery-operated radios near them. Lexy corralled them at night, herded them by day. Yet despite her best efforts, the southern Montana rancher has lost scores of lambs – fifty last year alone.

Then she discovered an unusual ally: the llama. These funny-looking South American beasts are curious. “Llamas don’t appear to be afraid of anything,” Lexy said. “When they see something, they put their head up and walk straight toward it. That is aggressive behavior as far as the coyote is concerned, and they won’t have anything to do with that. Coyotes are opportunists. Llamas take that opportunity away.”

Do you ever have one of those weeks, months, years, when it seems that you are surrounded by coyotes?

- Your company seems to be going down with the economy. There appears to be no end to this free fall. Rumors of downsizing are flying about. The people upstairs are looking to “restructure.” Suddenly you find yourself far out on a limb ... the one they seem to be sawing off.
- You’ve been back in school a few months now. But something changed over the summer. A few of your friends no longer sit at your cafeteria table or hang out with you in gym. As a matter of fact, they seem to be hanging around the ones who give you a hard time.
- Every time your kids go to stay with your ex they come back a little distant and aloof. They ask a lot of embarrassing questions. You sense that they are developing an “attitude.”
- ‘Family gatherings,’ you say, ‘are a good idea ... on paper.’ Unfortunately, when you get together, everyone starts to push each other’s buttons. All the tension, all the arguments lead you to one conclusion: we’d get along better if we didn’t get together.

The coyotes are on the loose. They frustrate and disrupt, they sabotage and undermine, they delay and destroy what you try to do and who you try to be.

And what makes them so devilishly crafty, so difficult to stop is the variety of their attacks and the vulnerability of our spirits. It may be a single coyote or a herd. They may use a frontal assault or work behind your back. They may take you by surprise or gradually wear you down. No matter the method, it’s clear that coyotes are effective because they exploit our weakest, most vulnerable spot. It may be a skill you haven’t mastered, a temptation you can’t resist, a fear you can’t get past, a burden of guilt you can’t unload, a shameful act you can’t forget. For many of the people I meet, the most

common vulnerable spot is a low self-image. Even for those who project an outer image as strong as stone or steel, a low self-image is a crack, a breach in the wall. An attacker, whether human or demonic, simply applies pressure to that spot and the walls come tumbling down. “You’re worthless.” “You’ll never amount to anything.” “I told you you’d mess it up.” “When will you ever learn?” “You’ll never change.” “If people knew the *real* you they’d avoid you like the plague.”

Friends, when the coyotes threaten, we need to be llamas. When the attack comes, instead of burying our heads, running for cover, or rashly fighting back, we must simply raise our heads and calmly walk straight toward the challenge. And we do that not by our own power but in the power of God.

Nehemiah was just such a llama. He was a high counselor to the Emperor of Persia, the great superpower of that day. But God called him to leave that inner circle of power and go out to the frontier, to the city of his ancestors and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Chapter 1 of his memoirs tells us that he prepared for this job by spending four months in prayer. Chapter 2 relates how he won the king’s support for the project and motivated the local people to build. In chapter 3 every able man, woman and child begin turning rubble into ramparts. All along the process, there has been an undercurrent of tension and opposition. Now, as the walls begin to rise, the coyotes begin to howl.

The leader of the pack is a man named Sanballat, governor of the province of Samaria, just north of the province of Judah and the city of Jerusalem. He first appears in chapter 2 with Tobiah, governor of the province of Ammon, east of Judah. At first, they are disturbed that Nehemiah has come to promote the welfare of the Israelites (2:10). But soon, these two join forces with Geshem, the chief of Arabia, south of Judah. This trio begins to hurl mocking accusations at Nehemiah. “What is this you are doing? Are you planning to rebel against King Artaxerxes once this wall is rebuilt?” (see 2:19) Once, before Nehemiah arrived on the scene, they used a charge of treason to stop construction in Jerusalem (see Ezra 4). But Nehemiah sees through their plot. They care nothing for King Artaxerxes. The local governors fear that once Jerusalem is restored, the Jews will no longer be at their mercy. “The God of heaven will give us success,” Nehemiah replies to their taunts and threats. “We his servants will start rebuilding and Jerusalem will no longer be under your thumb.”

As the construction proceeds, Sanballat and his band of coyotes decide to ratchet up the opposition. At a rally of the local governors and the entire army of Samaria, Sanballat gives a propaganda speech. Using psychological warfare, he fires five flaming darts into the construction project.

1. “What are those feeble Jews doing?” Notice: he begins by attacking their self-image. He calls them “feeble” He plays upon their feelings of humiliation and inferiority. They’ve been kicked around by foreigners for the last 150 years. Now as they start to rise up, Sanballat wants to kick them back into their place.
2. “Will they restore their wall?” He turns from challenging their being to challenging their ability. They don’t know the first thing about construction! Tobiah adds, “If a tiny fox jumped up on their wall it would collapse.”
3. “Will they offer sacrifices again?” Next he casts doubt on the strongest resource they have: their faith in God. All along Nehemiah has stressed that God is with them, that

God will defend them, that God will give them success. Sanballat wants to cut their connection with the Lord.

4. “Will they finish in a day?” With this fiery dart he asks, ‘Why bother?’ ‘This is a waste of time and effort. Unless you can finish the wall by tomorrow our forces will descend on you and wipe you out before you even know what hit you. All your work will amount to nothing. Give it up.’
5. “Can they bring these burned stones and heaps of rubble back to life?” Finally, Sanballat challenges their hopes, dreams, and visions. ‘These Jews are kidding themselves. They can’t raise a city up from the dead.’

Have you ever heard these questions? Has anyone ever challenged your self-image, your abilities, your efforts, your hopes and dreams, your relationship with God? It’s hard when opponents throw those questions in your face. It’s worse when those questions fill your mind. That’s when Satan can do his worst to knock down your walls. In the words of Paul, that’s when the evil one fires his flaming arrows into our vulnerable souls (Ephesians 6:16). The goal of human and devilish enemies is to stop you from doing God’s work. John White has aptly said,

Anytime we are engaged in a work for God, we are likely to encounter the poison-tipped arrows of ridicule. A barrage of truth mingled with lies, innuendo, malicious gossip and implied threats is the normal experience of leaders. So expect to have your faults thrown in your face, your folly mocked, and your real progress belittled. When this happens, by all means allow yourself to be cut down to size, but do not let yourself be dismayed or intimidated. Remember, (the devil’s) aim is to make your knees buckle. He likes tongue-tied, ineffective Christians and plays on your secret fears and inferiorities to make you one of them.¹

Nehemiah was incensed by their war of words. He lashed out with angry words but not to his enemies. Instead, he gave his anger over to God in prayer. And that’s a better place to dump your anger than on the heads of your adversaries. Then Nehemiah proceeded with his work.

When the wall reached half its intended height, the enemy forces, now numbering troops from all the nations surrounding Judah, plotted an attack. It was agreed that a sudden ambush from all sides would be best. Word of the surprise attack leaked to the people of Jerusalem. The news ignited a panic among the exhausted workers. It spread throughout the city like fire on parched tinder. Ten times over, fear stricken Jews rushed up to Nehemiah shouting, “Wherever you turn, they will attack us” (4:12).

Nehemiah faced several options: a) stop building, b) build and ignore the danger, c) attempt a pre-emptive strike, d) dissolve into fear and indecision. The fact is, he chose none of these. As the coyotes began to howl, like a llama, Nehemiah calmly lifted his head and went straight out to meet the challenge. “We prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat” (4:9). He quickly organized his people into a

¹ John White, Excellence in Leadership, Inter-Varsity Press, Downers Grove, IL. c 1986, p. 70.

defensive force. He gave a sword, spear or bow to every worker. Half were stationed as guards at the most vulnerable breaks in the wall while the other half continued building. Some carried building materials in one hand and a sword in the other. Nehemiah and a select detail of guards kept watch. At the slightest sign of attack, the trumpet would sound and the people were to rally to that spot for a fight. From sunrise to star shine the people worked. Through day and night the guards scanned the hills and waited.

Nehemiah knew, however, that the real battle would be won or lost not on the hills around Jerusalem but in the hearts of his people. They were terrified. He needed to teach them to be llamas, to calmly walk forward and face the foe. He declared, “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” (4:14).

And what happened? When the coyotes saw that the llamas were ready to meet them, all their brash and bold words were deflated. Sanballat and his troops skulked off home with their tails between their legs. And the walls around Jerusalem were finished in 52 days.

With a trowel in one hand and a sword in the other, Nehemiah turned back the attack. As Christians, we also have a trowel and a sword to help us face our human and demonic foes. The Trowel is the work of God. The Lord has a purpose, a calling for you. He wants you to serve Him wherever you are. The goal of our opponents is to use a hundred different ways to stop us from following Jesus Christ. And that’s why God also equips us with a sword. It’s not a weapon made of steel. This sword is the Word of God. The book of Hebrews says, “The Word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12). When the evil one sows doubts and despair in your heart, read the Word.

If you feel worthless,

the Word says, “You are precious in my sight and I love you.” Isaiah 43:4.

If you are afraid,

the Word says, “Fear not, for I am with you. Be not dismayed I am your God.” Isaiah 41:10.

If you are weak and weary,

the Word says, “I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength” Philippians 4:13.

If you are in doubt,

the Word says, “Cast all your anxieties on Him, for he cares for You.” I Peter 5:7.

The goal of your opponents is to stop you from doing God’s work. When you feel like giving up and putting down the trowel, pick up the sword, study it, pray over it. Let it teach you how to stand up and face your coyotes. And then get back to work.

I want to take this moment to thank all of you for your kind words, good wishes and congratulations for the completion of my Doctor of Ministry degree. Many have asked me, “What is the proper way to address you now? Is Dr. Doug, Dr. Rev. Doug, Rev. Dr. Doug. Rev. Dr. Pastor Doug?” So, to make sure you use the approved, proper form, from now on, the correct way to address me is: Doug.

Another question I’ve frequently heard is: what was final paper about? Well...it was about you – Woodside. The title of my final work is: “EXPONENTIAL REPRODUCTION: COACHING SMALL GROUP LEADERS TO MENTOR, MOTIVATE, AND MOVE ON AT WOODSIDE CHURCH.” What did I learn over the last seven years? That God is calling us not just to survive or even thrive but be so alive

that we multiply. Nehemiah began with prayer. But after that – he didn't do all the work himself. He didn't rely on a few handpicked people. He didn't just work with his staff and elders. If he did, it would have taken 52 years not 52 days to finish the wall. What was his secret? He used multiple workers – men, women and children – to build the walls.

Jesus gives us a greater task than Nehemiah's. Our job is not to build up walls but to tear them down and build bridges. Jesus wants us to make disciples – to invite more and more people to discover that God will do anything and give everything to get them back into a relationship with Him. That cannot happen if only I do it. It can't happen if only the staff, elders and deacons do it. It only can happen when all of us share the Story of God's Good News. To do that, we have to multiply. We have to multiply the number of people who invite people who invite people to follow Jesus. We have to multiply the number of small groups that start small groups that start small groups. We have to multiply the number of mission projects that start mission projects that start mission projects. We have to multiply the number of worship services that start worship services that start worship services. We have to multiply the number of campuses that start campuses that start campuses and the number of churches that start churches that start churches.

What I found as I did my final paper is you are already multiplying and sharing God's story. By the power of the Holy Spirit you are beginning to multiply. So here is my challenge to you. Nehemiah challenged the people to rebuild the wall in 52 days. Over the next 52 days – between now and August 18 – would you invite one, two or three people who don't have a church home to join you when we pick up the New Testament part of the STORY in September? You can invite them to come to ARISE, come with you to a worship service, come to your Growth Group or just read a copy of the STORY. Imagine how many more people would learn about God's love Story if we all invited two or three people. That's multiplication! That's what God designed His church to do.

So, I want to end today by sharing these words from my final paper. They come from the Acknowledgment page in the front of the book.

I am deeply grateful to the staff, elders, deacons, and members of Woodside Church for all their love, support, and encouragement throughout my doctoral studies. They patiently listened to my discoveries and put flesh on them in ways I could not imagine. I am blessed beyond belief. "I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil 2:3-6).

Thank you.