

## “Confronting Your Coyotes”

Nehemiah 4:1-23

*Series: Rising from the Ruins Week 5. How to Build a Life of Perseverance*

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Lexy Lowler has a problem. Like many sheep ranchers in the West, she tried 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, corralled them at night, herded them by day. Yet despite her best efforts, she 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 says. “When they see something, they lift their heads and walk straight toward it. To a coyote that’s aggressive behavior. 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? At work, at school, among your friends, in your family? 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.

What makes them 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, coyotes exploit your 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, the most common vulnerable spot is a low self-image. Even for those who appear 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 towards the challenge. And we do this not by our own power but in the power of God.

Nehemiah is just such a llama. As we saw last week, he is a high counselor to the Emperor of Persia, the great superpower of that day. Yet God calls him to leave the inner circle of power and go to the frontier, to the city of his ancestors and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Chapter 1 of his memoirs tells us he prepared for this job by spending four months in prayer. In chapter 2 he wins the king’s support for the project and motivates the local people to build. In chapter 3 every able man, woman and child begins turning

rubble into ramparts. All through the process, there is an undercurrent of tension and opposition. Now, as the walls begin to rise, the coyotes begin to howl.

The leader of the pack is Sanballat, governor of the province of Samaria, just north of the province of Judah and the city of Jerusalem.

When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites. Nehemiah 2:10

Soon, these two join forces with Geshem, the chief of Arabia, south of Judah. This trio hurls mocking accusations at Nehemiah.

“What is this you are doing?” they asked. “Are you rebelling against the king?” Nehemiah 2:19

Nehemiah sees through their plot. They care nothing for King Artaxerxes. Once Jerusalem is restored, the other governors fear the Jews will no longer be at their mercy. “The God of heaven will give us success,” Nehemiah replies to their taunts and threats.

As the walls rise, Sanballat and his band of coyotes ratchet up the opposition. At a rally of the Samaritan army, 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 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!’” Nehemiah 4:3
3. “Will they offer sacrifices again?” Next he casts doubt on the strongest resource: their faith in God. All along Nehemiah stresses God is with them, God will defend them and 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. Our forces will descend on you and wipe you out sundown. 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 and dreams. ‘These Jews are kidding themselves. They can’t raise a city up from the dead.’

Have you ever faced these flaming arrows? Has anyone attacked your self-image, abilities, relationship with God, efforts, hopes and dreams? It's hard when opponents throw those questions in your face. It's worse when these questions fill your mind. That's when Satan can do his worst to knock down your walls. 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.<sup>1</sup>

This war of words infuriates Nehemiah. Yet he doesn't lash out at his enemies. Instead, he gives his anger over to God in prayer. That's a better place to dump your anger than on the heads of your adversaries. Then Nehemiah proceeds with his work.

These external attacks, however, are aided by internal disunity. "Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their Jewish brothers." (Nehemiah 5:1). The people of Jerusalem are in debt to their fellow Jews. "When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry" (Nehemiah 5:6). As he fights off attacks from without, wealthy nobles are undermining his efforts from within. This issue is so troubling, he stops their urgent project and confronts the nobles in front of all the people.

As far as possible, we have bought back our Jewish brothers who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your brothers, only for them to be sold back to us!  
Nehemiah 5:8

What a truly vicious circle! Poor starving Jewish farmers take out loans from the wealthier Jews. When they can't pay the loans, the wealthy people sell them into slavery to their Gentile enemies. Then Nehemiah buys them out of slavery only to have them sent back around again. You can see why Nehemiah is so angry.

The thing Satan wants most is to get God's people to fight one another. Then he can carry on his work without interruption. Through the centuries, Christians have fought Christians over the tiniest issue. From what I have heard and seen, there is discord, disunity and even division in nearly every congregation in America today. Let's be different. Let's come together. Let's be united. We are not a right church or a left church, a Republican church or a Democrat church. We are not even a middle of the road church. We are a Kingdom church – a church that seeks first Jesus' Kingdom and Jesus' Righteousness. Nehemiah united God's people by giving them a mission – by giving every man, woman, teen and child a job to do in building up the wall. Here is our mission

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

– every man, woman, teen and child has a job to bless people, to invite people to follow Jesus, to make disciples of Jesus. Let’s work together to build up the kingdom of God!

When the wall reaches half the height, the enemy forces from all the nations surrounding Judah, plot an attack. They agree a sudden ambush from all sides will be best. Word of the surprise attack leaks to the people of Jerusalem. The news ignites a panic among the exhausted workers. It spreads throughout the city like fire on parched tinder. Ten times over, fear stricken Jews rush up to Nehemiah shouting, “Wherever you turn, they will attack us” Nehemiah 4:12

Nehemiah has 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 chooses none of these. As the coyotes begin to howl, like a llama, Nehemiah calmly lifted his head and goes straight out to meet the challenge.

But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.  
Nehemiah 4:9

He quickly organizes his people into a defensive force. He gives a weapon to every worker. Half are stationed as guards at the most vulnerable breaks in the wall while the other half continues building. Some carry building materials in one hand and a sword in the other. Nehemiah and a select detail of guards keep watch. At the slightest sign of attack, the trumpet will rally the people to fight at that spot. From sunrise to star shine the people work. Through day and night the guards scan the hills and wait.

Nehemiah knows the real battle is won or lost not on the hills around Jerusalem but in the hearts of his people. They are terrified. He needs to teach them to be llamas, to calmly walk forward and face the foe. He declares,

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.  
Nehemiah 4:14

And what happens? When the coyotes see the llamas are ready to meet them, all their brash and bold words are deflated. Sanballat and his troops skulk off home with their tails between their legs.

With a trowel in one hand and a sword in the other, Nehemiah turns 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, a vocation 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 anxious, the Word says,

Cast all your anxieties on Him, for He cares for you. I Peter 5:7.

If you are in doubt, the Word says,

I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world. John 16:33

Your opponents want 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.

Do you hear that? The coyotes are howling.

It's time to go out and face them like llamas of God following the Lamb of God.

Amen.