

WALL BUILDERS

NEHEMIAH 4:6-20

So we built the wall, and the entire wall was joined together up to half its height, for the people had a mind to work. Now it happened, when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites heard that the walls of Jerusalem were being restored and the gaps were beginning to be closed, that they became very angry, and all of them conspired together to come and attack Jerusalem and create confusion. Nevertheless we made our prayer to our God, and because of them we set a watch against them day and night. Then Judah said, "The strength of the laborers is failing, and there is so much rubbish that we are not able to build the wall." And our adversaries said, "They will neither know nor see anything, till we come into their midst and kill them and cause the work to cease."

So it was, when the Jews who dwelt near them came, that they told us ten times, "From whatever place you turn, they will be upon us." Therefore I positioned men behind the lower parts of the wall, at the openings; and I set the people according to their families, with their swords, their spears, and their bows. And I looked, and arose and said to the nobles, to the leaders, and to the rest of the people, "Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, great and awesome, and fight for your brethren, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses."

And it happened, when our enemies heard that it was known to us, and that God had brought their plot to nothing, that all of us returned to the wall, everyone to his work. So it was, from that time on, that half of my servants worked at construction, while the other half held the spears, the shields, the bows, and wore armor; and the leaders were behind all the house of Judah. Those who built on the wall, and those who carried burdens, loaded themselves so that with one hand they worked at construction, and with the other held a weapon. Every one of the builders had his sword girded at his side as he built. And the one who sounded the trumpet was beside me. Then I said to the nobles, the rulers, and the rest of the people, "The work is great and extensive, and we are separated far from one another on the wall. Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us."

If you're a dad, you have a commonality with Nehemiah... you carry a burden. Nehemiah spent his 8 to 5's in the royal court. He was the king's cupbearer, but when the whistle blew and his work was done he headed home to bear a different kind of concern. Nehemiah was burdened for the children... the children of Israel. SLIDE Nehemiah was living in Shushan, the winter residence of the Persian emperor, when news arrived of trouble in Jerusalem. The walls were rubble. The gates had been burned. SLIDE The city was in shambles, and the inhabitants were vulnerable to danger... and Nehemiah's driving passion was to re-erect those ravaged walls.

If you're a dad, you too are saddled with a concern that's perpetually on your mind. When you punch the clock on the day's business, and head home – you too carry a burden for children – not the children of Israel... but your children. Like Nehemiah, we as dads see that the walls around our kids have crumbled. Where's the moral base - the transcendent values? Where are the divine truths that provide our kids the boundaries and guidelines they so desperately need? The walls of morality and truth are in rubble, and it's every father's burden to rebuild them. If you're a father you have a lot in common with Nehemiah...

Understand, in ancient times a city's walls were extremely important... First, SLIDE walls reflected a city's prosperity. The wealthier the city - the taller, thicker, and more ornate the walls... One look at the wall revealed a city's status. Second, SLIDE walls provided a city power. They shielded the people from the enemy's onslaughts – the stronger the walls the stronger its citizen's resolve. Third, SLIDE walls determined a city's protection. They kept out wild animals and sinister people that might want to disturb the peace, and cause people harm. Fourth, SLIDE walls expanded a city's perspective. From the tops of the walls the look-outs could see further and clearer. It was a necessary vantage point.

Of course, modern cities no longer have walls. Today, the importance is on a different type of wall. Walls of truth and values - morality and spirituality – these are what provide a society with prosperity, power, protection, and perspective...

When a society acknowledges God's truth, and is governed by transcendent values people's lives have meaning. They become productive and SLIDE prosperous. A moral and spiritual people become a stronger people. Saying no to temptation, and yes to God, cultivates a personal SLIDE power and resolve. A society based on divine truth affords people SLIDE protection. God erects loving walls - more to keep dangers out, than to hem us in. His truth is a safe haven. And a people who promote God's truth gain an eternal SLIDE perspective. From the top of the wall we can see beyond the immediate to what God has on the horizon.

When Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem we're told he took a night time tour of the city, and the situation was as grim as he'd heard. In 2:17 he tells the leaders of the Jews, SLIDE "You see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lies in waste..." Today, when I look at our society I come to the same conclusion. We're in dire distress. Morally we're a wasteland. Spiritually we're in ruins. The walls are rubble.

SLIDE Why is it hard for us to understand why a kid can walk into a school with a loaded gun, and start blowing up the place? There are no more walls! We've never given that kid a reason why one human whim is any more right or wrong than another. Society's conscience doesn't blink when an unborn baby is murdered, so why is it wrong to kill them after they've been around a few years? If there's no ultimate truth, what's the point anyway? Life becomes a cruel joke. A society that kicks the Bible, and prayer, and absolute truth out of its schools tears down walls that are irreplaceable. Kids grow up confused and chaotic. They lack principle. They're vulnerable to every hideous evil the devil throws at them.

As a father here was my starting point... I envisioned my four treasured children surrounded by SLIDE rabid pit-bulls – oh, at least a dozen. They're licking their chops, frothing at the mouth, closing in on my kids like they were a pound of ground round... I'm not exaggerating! That's the spiritual environment we live in. As a dad, you need to build walls... and you need to build them fast!

Social commentator, Jack Krammer, tells about the night he got stranded in rough and tumble South-central LA. Late for a flight, he couldn't find a taxi, so he decided to take a chance. Three Hispanic teenagers were standing by their car. Jack asked them how much it would cost him to get a ride to the airport. The driver said, "10 bucks." Jack offered 20, and jumped in with the three men. Obviously, Jack was nervous. These guys could rip him off, take his suitcase, or worse... Jack became even more antsy and uneasy when they reached the freeway, and turned east. He thought for sure the airport was west.

Finally Jack sighed, "I hope you're going to take care of me." One guy laughed, "It's okay, man. We're good guys." Jack hoped he was right. All the social issues Jack Krammer was fond of writing about were suddenly with him in the same car. Before long Jack asked, "Are there gangs at your school?" "There's gangs everywhere, man. It's crazy." "Are you guys in a gang?" "No way, man." "Why not?" "Because there's no hope in it. You just get a bullet in your head, man." "Yeah, but what hope is there for you outside the gang?" "I don't know, man. I just want to get a future. Do something." "What's the difference between you guys and the gangs?" "I don't know, man. I don't know. We're just lucky, I guess."

Jack thought for a minute, then he asked, "What about fathers? Do you guys have a father at home?" The kid in the backseat said, "Yeah, I do." The other two kids said, "Yeah, I got a dad." "Is he living with you?" All three answered, "Yeah." Jack followed a suspicion, "Do guys in the gang have fathers living with them?" "No way, man. None of them do." "Does dad make a difference?" "Absolutely. He's always behind you, man, push'n you. Keep'n you in line. Telling you what's what." Jack concludes his account of his ride to LAX, SLIDE "I was taken right where I needed to go. The driver even asked what terminal I wanted. On time, without a hitch. And the men to whom I am most grateful are the men I never met. It was their fathers who got me to the airport. It was their fathers who kept me safe."

It's a father's job to build moral and spiritual walls around his kids. And when it comes to building walls no one was better at it than Nehemiah... I want all dads to notice four facets of Nehemiah's wall building – they also apply to us. SLIDE 1) His priority was imperial. SLIDE 2) His presence was imperative. SLIDE 3) His plan was ingenious. (He built, battled, bugled.) SLIDE 4) His persistence was important. Dad, if you care about your kids you'll build walls... and you'll start today.

First, notice Nehemiah's SLIDE priority was imperial. It came from the King! SLIDE Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem, and the construction of the walls was commanded by a royal decree from the Persian Emperor, Artaxerxes.

And dad, no less than the King of the universe has sanctioned a dad to involve himself in the lives of his children and build walls. You have divine authorization to teach your kids biblical truth and morality - to set limits, draw boundaries, erect standards. Dad, parenting your child is a God-given commission! There are very few pursuits in my life that I can say are sanctioned by God. I don't have a divine mandate to work in my front yard, or play golf, or piddle on my computer. I've never heard, "Thus saith the Lord, Sandy watch television." But I've been called by God to build spiritual and moral walls around my kids.

Second, Nehemiah's SLIDE presence was imperative. It's hard to build walls in Jerusalem while you're hanging out on the other side of the world in Shushan. Nehemiah had to be on-site to construct walls.

Being a good dad involves many elements - but the first step, the indispensable step, is to simply be there. Dad, your presence in the life of your kids is imperative. Some dads act like kids come with a pause button - they can push pause on their child's development while they go off to do their own thing - or decide to grow up. They're under the illusion that the opportunities will still be there when they get ready. It'll be a rude awakening! By the time you're ready, he may no longer care.

Wade Horn comments, SLIDE "My father was a great dad. I didn't always think so, of course. When I was growing up, I thought of him as an overbearing, autocratic, stick-in-the-mud whose main mission in life was to make mine miserable." But I have since come to realize he had one great quality. He was there. Someone once said 90% of life was just showing up. My dad showed up..."

This past week I ran across the Top 10 Dishes Served When Mom is Away and Dad is home 'Cooking'... "SLIDE 10) Hot dogs with a hint of Tabasco... SLIDE 9) 'Kids Eat Free' night at the steak house... SLIDE 8) Pizza... SLIDE 7) Broiled bologna benedict on rye... SLIDE 6) Back-of-the-fridge goulash (with lots of pepper)... SLIDE 5) Chips and salsa... SLIDE 4) Cocoa Puffs... SLIDE 3) Something old, something blue, something frozen, call it stew... SLIDE 2) Cold Pizza... SLIDE 1) Whatever's cooking at Grandma's... But at least dad is there and he's trying..."

Understand what the statistics say are likely to happen if dad is not there, SLIDE "63% of youth suicides are committed by kids from fatherless homes. SLIDE 90% of runaways, 80% of rapists, 71% of High School drop-outs, 75% of kids on drugs or alcohol, and 85% of all youths in prison... all come from homes without a father."

A Chinese proverb says, SLIDE "A broken nest seldom produces whole eggs." The involvement of a dad increases a child's chances of success. Dad, if you want to build walls you have got to be there!

Nehemiah's priority was imperial, and his presence was imperative... and third, his SLIDE plan was ingenious. It involved three tactics - he SLIDE built, battled, and bugled. First, Nehemiah went to work SLIDE building the walls. SLIDE He rolled up his shirtsleeves and got at it.

Verse 6 says, "the people had a mind to work" - and that needs to be a father's mentality. You've got to work at being a good dad, and an example to your kids. When it comes to building walls here's where it's not going to come to you. Dad, you've got to make it happen. You've got to read the Bible with your kids - pray with your kids - talk about life together - solve problems together... Always be on the look-out for the teachable moment - when you can draw on a real-life situation to teach a spiritual truth...

The kid on the baseball team who throws a temper tantrum or acts cocky is an opportunity to talk about why a good attitude is important. Rejection from a friend your child trusted - becomes the springboard for a lesson on why our security needs to be in God, and not in other people. Nervousness before a test is fertile ground to teach the power of prayer and a reliance on the Holy Spirit... as well as, the importance of studying once in a while. These are all opportunities to teach. For a wise dad who looks out for his kids, school is always open - class is always in session. All of life becomes a lesson.

Too many kids today feel as if their life has no value. They lack a desire to excel. A dad builds walls by affirming his child's efforts. Kids live for their dad's approval. All the world may be a fan, but a kid needs to know his dad is in his corner. In High School I was the quarterback on our football team... and I was good! I was a legend in my own mind. In fact, the older I get the better I was... I remember running touchdown after touchdown... the girls squealing... the fans chanting my name... yet the only person I looked for in the bleachers was Dad. His "thumbs up" meant more than all the cheers. Kids live for their dad's acceptance.

SLIDE Derek Redmond is a track star from Great Britain. He ran the 400 meters. In the Olympics Games he cruised to an early lead. It looked like he would coast to victory, until he suddenly pulled up in pain. He tore an Achilles tendon – and collapsed in the last 50 yards. But that's when a marvelous thing happened... SLIDE Derek's dad jumped out of the stands, and ran onto the track. He grabbed his son by the arm, and helped him cross the finish line. Obviously, Derek Redmond didn't win, but he finished, accomplishing a goal... and it was thanks to his dad. Dads encourage kids to finish, and not give up. Dads pull for their kids – they tell them they can do it - and let them know it's okay when they don't. Dads build.

But building isn't the only task necessary to erect walls, it also requires SLIDE battling. Walls include standards of behavior, the demand for honesty, curfews, dating guidelines, academic expectations – and the reasons behind those rules. The world is full of choices, and your kids need to be allowed to make choices. But they also need parameters. They need limits to the choices they can make. Without limits life can be deadly. Establishing those limits, while cultivating the tools to make good choices, is the demanding and never-ending job of a dad.

Nehemiah knew a city without walls was susceptible to a parade of danger. This is why his enemies try to thwart his efforts. To erect the walls he had to battle, as well as build. In verse 9 he "set a watch". In verse 13 he armed his workers. In verse 17 they held a sword in one hand and shovel in the other. And that's what it takes to grow kids... both some building and battling. Notice in verse 14 how Nehemiah encourages the people of Jerusalem, SLIDE "Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, great and awesome, and fight for your brethren, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses." In the world we live in dads also have to fight for their sons and daughters! We have to battle.

Note especially, where Nehemiah stationed the guards... Verse 13, "behind the lower parts of the wall, at the openings." His chief concerns were the foundations, and the openings. And these are also the areas where a dad needs to focus - SLIDE the child's foundation, or belief system - and the openings, or exposures to the world. Dad, be attentive to what your child believes and receives. And this is the area where a dad not only battles the evil out there, but he SLIDE also battles his own kids. For kids want to watch the hip movies, listen to the cool music, tune in the popular TV shows, have unlimited access to the internet - even when they're accessing moral filth and spiritual garbage. Curiosity, and peer pressure combine to produce blindness. Sometimes they just don't see why we say "no."

It reminds me of the kids who wanted to go to a movie of which dad did not approve. The kids explained, "It only has four curse words, one sex scene, and mild violence – but the special effects are incredible, and the good guy wins." Dad still put his foot down. Later that night he went into the kitchen and made brownies. SLIDE The kids were licking their chops... but just before they bit in, dad told them, "I put just a little bit of dog poop in with the brownie mix. It's not a lot. It shouldn't spoil the taste. They're still good brownies." Of course, no one ate. Dad was trying to get the kids to see the obvious. If a little poop in a brownie makes it inedible, why doesn't a little filth in a movie make it inappropriate?

Dad, it's up to you to just say "No" - to build walls for yourself, and your kids. What you make off-limits to your kids, be sure is also off-limits to you. Kids sniff out hypocrisy a mile away. Your kids may grow older and buck your standards, but when they do, they'll never know how far they've fallen, if you haven't set the bar.

And at times, will setting these standards put you at odds with your kids? You bet it will. One author defines a dad as "the provider of all, and the enemy of all..." That's how a dad can feel. He loves his kids, yet he can be hated for insisting on what's best for them. A dad has to always remind himself... I'm not running for re-election. A father's goal is not to be popular, but to grow healthy and godly kids.

Bill Maher is the host of the TV show, "Politically Incorrect". Trust me, I agree with few of Bill's political opinions, but he did make a comment about being a dad that resonated with me... He was asked, "Were you and your dad good friends?" Bill replied, SLIDE "Friends? We're friends now, but while growing up I didn't need him to be my friend, but my dad. This idea of dads getting mushy, and being friends is overblown. Dads are supposed to be the guy who tells you right from wrong." Dad, I know you want to be your child's friend one day, but while he or she is under your roof, your role is more important than "friend." You're a "father." My kids have lots of "so-called friends" who'll tickle their ears and butter them up, but they've got only one dad who'll put his foot down and tell them what they need to hear. There are times SLIDE when a father's place is in his kid's face.

I've heard it put, SLIDE "Kids are like stomachs – they don't need everything we can afford to give them." Children don't need to be over indulged – they need to learn self-discipline - how to defer a desire – how to turn from temptation – how to put principle above convenience. And it's certain, a child won't develop the kind of character that says "no to sin" – if his dad lacks the courage to say "no to him."

A dad can't be afraid of the fight. Sometimes we battle for our kids. At other times we battle with our kids. But if I've learned anything about being a dad it's this... SLIDE A father has to win the battles. Dad, SLIDE kids will forgive your weakness, but cowardice will send them elsewhere for strength. A dad needs to battle.

It reminds me of a night when my sons and I were walking across the ball field to the car. Out of the blue, my oldest – 15 and full of testosterone - says to me, "Dad, take off your glasses and wrestle. I think I can take you." "Oh, you think you can take me?" I took off my glasses, and handed them to his stunned brothers. They realized their older sibling had challenged the status quo. Well, it took 5 seconds for me to have my son in a full nelson, rubbing his face in the grass. I'd put down the challenge. Restored order... The world was right again. Hey, a family is in big trouble when the patients take over the asylum. Your kids are going to wrestle with you dad. A godly father learns how to pin them in love.

It's amazing how our appreciation for dad changes over time...

At 7 years old: My Dad knows a lot, a whole lot.

At 10 years old: My Father doesn't quite know everything.

At 17 years old: Dad? He's so old-fashioned. I know more than dad.

At 22 years old: Dad knows a little bit, but not much.

At 30 years old: A little patience. I need to find out what Dad thinks first.

At 50 years old: I wish I could talk it over with Dad. He knew everything.

Fathers, be encouraged. As Nehemiah said, "fight for your sons and daughters."

Nehemiah's plan to erect the walls was to build, battle, and SLIDE bugle. He says to the workers in verses 19-20, "The work is great and extensive, and we are separated far from one another on the wall. Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us." In other words, we're so spread out you could get attacked, and no one would know until it's too late. And this is the problem for modern families. We get so spread out – brother has a ballgame, sister a dance recital, dad has to go out of town – it doesn't take long for family members to grow distant, and become unaware of each other's hurts. Dad, erecting walls of prosperity, and power, and protection, and perspective for your kids, necessitates you finding ways to keep open lines of communication.

After each broadcast of SLIDE ABC's World New Tonight, the late Peter Jennings used to pick up the telephone... And the reason might surprise you... In an interview Jennings once explained, SLIDE "Sometimes I call the producers to see if they liked the show, but just as often I call my children, and tell them that I'm on my way home for dinner." SLIDE Peter Jennings brought news to the world, but his more important job was trying to find ways to communicate with his kids. Dad, if you value the communication you'll be the one to initiate the effort.

The biggest hindrance to communication is pride. Why should I have to take the first step? Once you embrace humility and empathy – what to say is a lot easier. Long time president of the University of Michigan, Dr. James Angell, explained the secret of his success, SLIDE "Grow antennae, not horns." This is the key to being a good parent. Stay sensitive. Often a behavior you'd like to gore is a cry for help. It's been said, SLIDE "Talk to your kids in a way that will make them want to listen, and listen to your kids in a way that will make them want to talk."

Nehemiah had a job to do. His priority was imperial, his presence was imperative, his plan was ingenious, and his SLIDE persistence was important. Throughout this book one of the traits we admire most about Nehemiah is his resistance to distraction. Nehemiah has an uncanny ability to stay focused.

His enemies taunt him, but he works. They invite him to pointless meetings, but he works. They accuse him falsely, but he works. He knows there's nothing more important for him to do than to work on the wall. His focus was like a laser beam.

Dads can get distracted and discouraged. Being a dad is a thankless job. When was the last time one of your kids thanked you for paying the mortgage, or buying groceries, or providing health insurance? I'm sure your little girl will kiss you for making her return her new swimsuit because it's too skimpy – or your son is going to pat you on the back for taking his car keys away after he gets a ticket.

Dad, you're fighting for your kids – you're trying to erect walls – but instead of building walls, you feel like you're beating your head against the wall. Your kids are fighting against you. Why keep at it? Why stay focused? Logic says if a kid is determined to walk off a cliff... then just let him! But a dad can't do that! A father has a God-given burden that supersedes logic. He sees the need for moral and spiritual walls around his kids, and can't live with himself if he shirks the responsibility to build them. God burns it in our heart.

Men, your kids need a dad who is just as sure of his calling as Nehemiah. SLIDE His priority was imperial, and so is yours – every dad is commissioned by the King of kings... SLIDE His presence was imperative – nobody can take the place of a kid's dad... SLIDE His plan was ingenious – he built, battled, bugled. And this plan still works for fathers' today... And SLIDE his persistence was important, as it is for every dad... Being a father isn't easy, but it's desperately needed. A father bears a burden... Dad, build strong walls around your kids!