

 <p>The logo for Waiuku Assembly of God features a stylized sun with rays in yellow and orange, a blue cross, and the word 'Waiuku' in a blue script font. Below this, there are blue wavy lines representing water, and the words 'ASSEMBLY OF GOD' in a blue, sans-serif font.</p>	<p>Chris Woodham Senior Pastor PO Box 196 Waiuku 1852 PH: (09) 235 7341 MOB: (021) 187 1928 Email: waiukuag@wag.org.nz Web: www.wag.org.nz</p>
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Introduction

I've heard it said that for many Pastors all it takes for them to leave a church is to have seven people in the church who are against them; I believe that.

It's funny, we see this everywhere in life. Regardless of how many great things are happening and how many encouraging words are spoken, most of us only hear the one or two negative words and fixate upon them.

Discouragement, it seems, is something we more readily accept than encouragement.

Somehow the fact that ten people say something positive is negated by one person who is negative.

In truth, one negative comment or one attack does not in any way actually diminish any of the great things that have happened, but for some reason it's so easy to highlight that single thing and allow it to destroy the joy of our successes.

Discouragement; It's a powerful thing isn't it?

But in truth, it's only as powerful as we allow it to be.

Unfortunately, often we do allow these things to influence us and rob us of our victory and joy – it's no small wonder then that something which can be so destructive and powerful in the physical world is also something which the enemy will exploit in the spiritual world.

Are we defeated just because of one negative word? No, but if we can be convinced that the negative word is true then we defeat ourselves.

I'd like to share an illustration to demonstrate this.

Illustration

Picture a circus, as usual it's a chaotic scene, a member of the public rushes up to the Ring Master very concerned about the elephants out back.

As you know, elephants can get a bit restless, the average circus elephant would be an Asian cow of around 3,500kg to 4,500kg (that's big!).

So there's a lot of strength and power there should they choose to unleash it.

So this concerned member of the public rushes up, concerned that these awesome animals are only restrained by a chain and a stake that was rather small compared to the elephant. The concerned citizen points out that the elephant could very easily pull that stake out of the ground should it so choose.

The ring master pulls the person aside and says "Yes, you're absolutely right. If that elephant wanted to it could just walk off out of there and barely even notice the stake popping out of the ground, but" he continued, "let me tell you a story. When that elephant was very small we chained her to that same stake with that same chain, and it tried to pull against it but the stake wouldn't budge. Today, the elephant doesn't even try, because what she learned when she was young was never challenged again and so she still believes that the stake will hold her there."

Explanation

That stake is like those negative words or attacks. None of them actually have any strength or power whatsoever, but once we allow ourselves to be beaten by them – we hand all our victories over to them and defeat ourselves.

We have a word for these kinds of attacks: INTIMIDATION

Intimidation is a tactic used by bullies, by people who are generally more talk than actual ability, who have no real authority but will take any opportunity to make themselves feel like they have power, who don't really have true strength but through intimidation can defeat those far more able than themselves.

Intimidation is one of the most effective tactics that the enemy employs against us when we begin to push the boundaries of our experience and begin to realise the life God has promised us in His Kingdom.

We've spoken a couple of times recently on the authority of the Kingdom of God, God's authority over the Kingdom of Darkness which He has given to followers of Jesus, to us.

The enemy of authority is intimidation.

You see, the enemy can't stop Jesus giving us His authority, but if he can convince us that we haven't received it then he's achieved the same thing.

The enemy of the authority God has given us is the intimidation of the enemy. But unless we take that intimidation on board – it has no real power.

A Lesson in Facing Intimidation

Those of you who are in a small group would have learned a bit about one of the Bible's great visionaries last week.

Nehemiah had a vision from God, a God-given task and strategy to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem which had been destroyed many years earlier when the majority of the nation was conquered and taken into captivity.

Nehemiah overcame a number of challenges; from hostile surrounding nations, from negative people within, and from attitudes of greed and laziness in his own people.

Just on that, you know, you can travel the world and never find a monument to a critic. You'll find monuments to people who have accomplished great things, and you'll find monuments to people who have attempted great things, you'll even find monuments to people who have attempted great things and failed miserably but one thing you will not find is a monument to the nay-sayer's and critics.

So Nehemiah overcame all this opposition and was on the verge of this great breakthrough – the walls were finally near completion.

Let's pick up the story here: Nehemiah 6.

[READ NEHEMIAH 6:1-19]

Intimidation Versus Vision

Nehemiah is a book about vision. It's about someone who had a burden on their heart, a passion, a desire and who received God's plan to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

More than anything else, the book of Nehemiah is a book of vision.

Did you know that the word "intimidate" only occurs three times in the NIV Bible? Three times.

There are a couple of other words that only occur three times, words like: Zimmah, Ziphites and Zuph.

Another interesting thing to note is that of those three times that the word "intimidate" is used, all of them are found in the book of Nehemiah and all within a few lines of each other.

In actual fact, the Hebrew word that the NIV translates as "intimidate" in this passage is found many times throughout the Old Testament, it's the word יָרָא {yaw-ray'} and in other places it is translated "fear" or "afraid". However, in this one book, and in this book alone, the word is translated "intimidate".

Remember, Nehemiah is a book primarily about God's vision.

When we begin to pursue God's vision and operate in the authority He's given us then the enemy launches his most effective attack: intimidation.

Remember, Jesus has given us authority – there's nothing that Satan can do about that, but if he can convince us that we haven't received that authority, that the vision is flawed or impossible, then he's achieved the same results as if he'd been able to remove that authority itself.

Intimidation is the enemy of authority. Moving in God's vision, His plan, goes hand-in-hand with walking in the authority that God has given us.

The enemy will often try to intimidate us when we pursue God's vision.

Five Faces of Intimidation

Let's have a look at these tactics of intimidation in Nehemiah.

There are five faces of intimidation that were launched upon Nehemiah.

1. The first volley comes in the form of a series of four letters sent to Nehemiah by his enemies: Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem, and the rest of his enemies who are unnamed.

Let's just explain the situation Nehemiah was facing. Sanballat was the Governor of Samaria¹ who ruled what is today the West Bank. Tobiah's position is not mentioned, but is obviously a leader in the country called Ammon, which is modern day Jordan to the East. Geshem was an Arab, whose territory was to the South of Israel. Finally there is mention of Nehemiah's "other enemies", we can read earlier in Nehemiah that some of these were called the "men of Ashod"² which is to the North in the area known as the Gaza Strip today.

So Nehemiah was effectively surrounded on all sides by these people who had armies and power and wealth and who were all out to get him – not my idea of a great strategic location!

These letters were sent to try and distract Nehemiah and trap him, they were aimed at drawing Nehemiah away from God's vision for him.

We read in verse 2 "Come, let us meet together..." Sounds harmless enough doesn't it? But Nehemiah knew better, you see, when we begin working towards God's vision we need to be single-minded and alert for any traps that the enemy might spring, we need to ask God for discernment in identifying the work of the enemy and distractions from fulfilling God's plan.

Nehemiah refused to allow anything to take his energy away from God's vision.

2. The second volley seems the same, but there's one significant difference. The fifth letter was sent *unsealed*. Now, why would you send a letter supposedly exposing a conspiracy of lies *unsealed*?

In those days a letter would be rolled up and sealed with the leaders seal in wax to ensure the contents were private and to guarantee its authenticity.

¹ Nehemiah 2:10

² Nehemiah 4:7

So why would a letter containing such treacherous news and claiming to be wanting to help Nehemiah be left *unsealed*?

Let's read the verse, Nehemiah 6:5-7

NIV Nehemiah 6:5 *Then, the fifth time, Sanballat sent his aide to me with the same message, and in his hand was an unsealed letter⁶ in which was written: "It is reported among the nations-- and Geshem says it is true-- that you and the Jews are plotting to revolt, and therefore you are building the wall. Moreover, according to these reports you are about to become their king⁷ and have even appointed prophets to make this proclamation about you in Jerusalem: 'There is a king in Judah!' Now this report will get back to the king; so come, let us confer together."*

Put yourself in Nehemiah's shoes; here he is, with no army, surrounded on every side by nations who want him wiped out and he receives a letter containing lies about a conspiracy in which he is supposedly involved and which threatens to get back to King Artaxerxes, supreme ruler of Persia which, at this time, ruled the whole region.

Have you ever been the victim of a vicious rumour? Lies or attacks? Ever found yourself in a situation where you are being blamed or threatened, even blackmailed to the point where it seems your only option is to surrender to those against you in order to prevent a worse fate?

Even worse, the news was sent in such a way as to promote fear and gossip among the people.

What would you do?

Let's look at what Nehemiah does next:

NIV Nehemiah 6:8 *I sent him this reply: "Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head."*

I love the Living Bible here:

NLT Nehemiah 6:8 *My reply was, "You know you are lying. There is no truth in any part of your story."*

Nehemiah does not mince his words – he exposes the lies of the enemy and affirms his loyalty to the king. Nehemiah doesn't stop there though, he asks God for strength and resolve to stay true to the vision.

When we face similar situations, how will we respond? Is our conviction and commitment to God and to His plans for us strong enough to stand firm against personal attacks and threats?

How much does God's vision mean to you? What are you willing to sacrifice to see God's will fulfilled?

3. The third tactic of intimidation was a bit more subtle. Remember this: Satan has been watching mankind since the beginning of time and knows what works and what doesn't work, when we recognise this we strip away the element of surprise in his attacks.

The enemy had already tried two very brazen attacks, Nehemiah had stood his ground and was now alert for further attacks.

In verses 10-13 Nehemiah recounts how someone close to him made a seemingly wise and compassionate suggestion to him. His associate warns of an assassination attempt upon Nehemiah's life and suggests they both go to the temple where they will be safe.

In those days there was what was called the "Altar of Asylum" in the temple, it was a place of safety and refuge for those in danger where no one would dare harm them in the presence of God.

However, the altar was not inside the temple – and as Nehemiah was not a priest he was forbidden by law from entering the temple.

This supposed word of advice would have caused Nehemiah to break God's law. This is when Nehemiah realised that God had not sent this man and that he was, in fact, working for the enemy.

"Sadly it is often from unexpected sources that threats or accusations come. It is sometimes fellow believers that cause us pain and distraction. Don't allow intimidation - even from Christian sources - to hold us back in working for the Lord. Don't be led into sin by the seeming good intentions of those who have been hired by the enemy. It can be so easy to try to take refuge from trouble whenever God wants us to face that trouble in order to prepare us for greater things."³

God was fulfilling His vision through the willing and obedient Nehemiah, if Nehemiah had wavered and given in to this intimidation he would have discounted himself from his part in God's plan.

³ Paul Scott – Online Christian – Nehemiah's Opposition
(<http://homepages.tesco.net/~paulscott/neh2.htm>)

4. The fourth attack was similar and is only touched on briefly so we'll just look at it in passing. Nehemiah prays and mentions a group of prophets who were "trying to intimidate [him]."

Unfortunately, not all those who prophecy in the name of the Lord accurately communicate His Word. Like all spiritual gifts, prophecy is subject to and passes through this "earthen vessel" and as such can be tainted by our human spirit.

This is why we need to test prophecy and see if it measures up with the Word of God and His revealed will for the situations we're in.

If God's Word is saying "go, go; build, build" and people are prophesying "stay, stop" then we need to be listening to the Word of God and His will which has been revealed in the Bible.

NIV Matthew 7:21 *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.²² Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?'²³ Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"*

Once we've received God's vision we need to be on high alert for not only will the enemy try and trip us, but others who feel left behind or inadequate for the vision may try to discourage us. Remember, God's vision for us is big – far bigger than we could ever hope to achieve in our own strength, accepting the vision and committing to it requires a reliance on God and an absolute conviction and commitment to God's plan that not everyone will choose to make.

The Holy Spirit will give the enabling if we give Him the opportunity. Are you someone who will give the Holy Spirit the opportunity to see you fulfill God's vision in your life?

5. The final assault of intimidation that Nehemiah describes in this passage is a familiar one, I'm sure, for many of us.

Verses 17-19 describe this scene: there are a whole heap of people who feel indebted to Nehemiah's enemy, Tobiah. He's obviously a man of power and influence and Nehemiah observes that many were swayed by him.

So you've got this slimy little scene where these people are essentially trying to trap Nehemiah into saying something wrong or slipping up. They're on the look out for any petty thing he does wrong so they can report back to Tobiah. Incidentally, this man Tobiah has no real power in

the situation. The king placed Nehemiah in the land and made him governor, these other leaders had no authority over the land and were themselves subject to the same king.

Isn't that such a great illustration of our worlds?

We've been given the authority over our territory by the King of Kings, the Creator of the universe, God. And there are others around us, sometimes the enemy, sometimes other people, even though they may seem powerful and overwhelming – they're only there by the grace of the same King. Their power is only over the patch of dirt God's given them.

It seems ridiculous that petty little things can have such an impact on fulfilling vision if they're allowed to gain a foothold and have influence.

But if we can identify them for what they are and expose the lies behind their illusions of power then they are truly powerless against us.

NIV Romans 8:31 *What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us?*

Summary

The enemy of authority is intimidation. Nehemiah received authority and a vision from God and faced severe intimidation, but held fast.

If God's given you a vision have you recognised the authority that He gives that accompanies that vision?

If you're seeking God's vision, are you prepared to run with it and exercise the authority God has promised?

Intimidation has no real power, but if the enemy can convince us that we don't have authority then the result is the same as if we hadn't received the vision in the first place.

God's got a vision for you. He's got a vision for this church.

Are you prepared to accept it?

Are you prepared to embrace His authority?

Are you prepared to confront intimidation and reduce it to nothing in God's strength?

Conclusion

Let's go back in our passage.

NIV Nehemiah 6:15 *So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days. ¹⁶ When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God.*

What was the result?

God gave the vision, God gave the authority, Nehemiah embraced it, stood firm and guess what?

God accomplished the impossible through him.

The result of Nehemiah's steadfastness in God's vision was that his enemies lost confidence and were afraid because they witnessed the resolve of a man of God and saw God's almighty power revealed through him.

We're pressing on with the things of God, we can expect opposition and resistance, and it's not easy. It's not easy.

This account of Nehemiah is not the story of a super-human who didn't know fear, who had perfect faith, who wasn't emotional or affected by others opinions and criticism.

Nehemiah was a normal person and had it tough. When Nehemiah prays for God to "strengthen his hands" in verse 9 he is using figurative language to describe his discouragement.

But he knew that despite this, God was for him and had the power to help him through.

Whatever intimidation we may be facing, God knows it's tough, and He knows we can get discouraged, but the Bible teaches that our God is like a Father who wants to strengthen us and see us succeed. Our God wants to lift us up and encourage us to press on.

Sometimes though, these situations are necessary for us to go through in order to draw us closer to Him and learn to rely on Him more and more. Some things we can only learn through pain and hardship – but God is there, and God will not send more our way than we can bear.

NIV 1 Corinthians 10:13 *No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.*

That word “temptation” also means trial, or test.

NIV James 1:3 *because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.*

The trials, tests, intimidations that we face are not intended to see how much it will take to see us fail – God’s will for us is only good, it’s life to the full.

NIV John 10:10 *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*

God may use trials and tests to build our faith and perseverance. The enemy may try to intimidate us to see us fail, but if we lean on God then He can turn that intimidation which the enemy intended to harm us and use it to strengthen our resolve and develop perseverance to bring us into even greater things in Him!

Intimidation literally means to be made timid. God hasn’t made us timid:

NIV 2 Timothy 1:7 *For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.*

Closing

What’s the vision God is revealing to you?

What’s the intimidation that you’re facing?

Is it unbelieving friends and family?

Is it critical people?

Is it the apathy of those around you to press in to the things of God?

Is it sickness?

Is it discouragement?

Is it fear?

Is it a sense of inadequacy or unworthiness to be used by God?

Ps. Ashely Evans says: “Intimidation is either the stepping stone to greater things or the tombstone to authority.” Let’s ask God to make it a stepping stone.

Let’s become the intimidators, not the intimidated.

God has promised us a spirit of power and love and self-discipline. Let’s claim our inheritance this morning!