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Title: When The Going Gets Tough

Text: Nehemiah 4:1-23

Each one of us has, at one time or another, played Tug-of-War. You know the game: you have a long rope, with one team on this end and one team on that end, and each team digs in and tries to pull the other team in their direction. When playing Tug-of-War, I find that it's crucial to be ready and listen closely for the starting whistle, so you can get the jump on the other team. That way, you'll have the edge in momentum. When a team has momentum, they have a better chance of winning. The team that doesn't have momentum has their work cut out for them. The laws of physics teach us that it takes little energy to move an object downhill; it takes a great amount of energy to move an object on a level surface; and it takes an enormous amount of energy to move an object uphill. This is the dilemma Nehemiah faced. He had an uphill climb ahead of him. Things were not going his way. The people were discouraged. His enemies were after him, and the job was more difficult than he had originally predicted. Nehemiah knew that he had to reverse the situation, because without the enthusiastic cooperation of the people, he could not finish the job. He understood the power of momentum, and he realized how desperately he needed to get it moving in his direction.

Which part of the race is the hardest? The beginning, the end, or the middle. What about the beginning? At the beginning you are operating with full strength. You aren't usually fully aware of what is needed to complete the race. And at the end? You finally see the finish line, so you have this surge of "I can do this." The cheering fans at the finish line bring needed encouragement. BUT THE MIDDLE? You didn't know it would be this hard. You have now experienced things you had not expected, and who knows what else is before you. You can't see the finish line and have doubts that you can make it. You've gone too far to turn back.

Verse 6 shows us that the team of builders is approaching a crucial part of the project (in some ways, the most difficult part of the project): "...we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height." The halfway point. This is where the going gets tough. This is where people are likely to throw in the towel and call it quits. When you're halfway through a project, the thrill of beginning a new venture has worn off, the initial rush of adrenaline has subsided, and the reality of the drudgery of daily work has set in. This is when new businesses start to sputter, churches start to stagnate, teams start losing games. When people reach this point, they seldom see how far they've come, they only see how far they have yet to go. They think, "We've worked so hard and there's still so much to do!" It is not surprising that Nehemiah's people became discouraged. They had reached the halfway point. The job looked impossible. Plus, on top of everything else, they were dealing with threats from their enemies.

Nehemiah suddenly found himself in a difficult position. Here's where many a leader drops the ball. Instead of encouraging their people, and helping them get back on track, they think their people need to be pushed and prodded and bullied into submission. The result is that instead of fixing the situation, many leaders often make it worse. But Nehemiah was not your average leader. He realized that his followers didn't need to be BEAT up – they needed to be BUILT up. He was sensitive to the feelings and frustrations of his followers. Remember, he had been a slave. His countrymen were slaves. He knew what it was like to be treated as less than human. Back in Babylon, his job was to taste the king's food before the king ate, to make sure it hadn't been poisoned. Nehemiah knew how it felt to be treated as if he were expendable. No doubt he had seen fellow slaves beaten and abused by their masters. Nehemiah didn't want to be that kind of leader. He wanted to get the wall built, and he wanted to maintain a positive relationship with his people during the process.

So Nehemiah stood before his people and said what needed to be said, and changed some things that needed to be changed. As a result, he diverted a major disaster in the workforce. If only there were more labor leaders like Nehemiah. If only there were more employers, and parents, and teachers, and coaches, and managers, and pastors who could lead like Nehemiah. How did he do it? How did he restore the morale of the group? I can explain Nehemiah's success in two words: HE LISTENED. When the going got tough, Nehemiah listened. He paid attention to what his people were saying, and then, he took action.

ILLUSTRATION: Many years ago Paine-Webber employed an advertising campaign that emphasized their ability to listen to the client's needs and custom-design an investment package for each one. You may remember the ads: "How did your broker know you wanted to retire early? He asked." They were selling the idea that Paine-Webber representatives listen. The ability to listen is so rare, this major brokerage firm considers it a selling point. Compare the success of this campaign with that of E.F. Hutton. Of course, everyone remembers: "When E.F. Hutton talks, people

listen.” But that campaign didn’t work – and E.F. Hutton eventually was dissolved. Paine-Webber realized that investors want to do business with a company who has a reputation for listening, rather than one who has a reputation for talking.

ILLUSTRATION: There’s a Winnie-the-Pooh story where Pooh eats so much honey that he gets stuck in the door on the way out of Rabbit’s house. While Rabbit and Owl are discussing how they might get Pooh unstuck, Gopher suddenly appears, offering to help. But he warns that it will cost a lot of money. When Owl asks how much, Gopher gives Owl some mumbo-jumbo about hourly rates, materials, over-time, “plus 10 percent” – but Gopher never answers the question. Owl says, “What’s your estimate?” Gopher’s answer, “Can’t give estimates – too risky.” Frustrated at Gopher’s non-response, Owl says, “Blast it all!” Gopher replies, “Good idea! We’ll dynamite; it’ll save time.” Owl asks again, “What’s the charge?” Gopher says, “The charge? About seven sticks of dynamite.” Owl says, “No, no, no. I mean what’s the charge, the cost in money?” Gopher says, “No. No charge accounts. I work strictly in cash.” Then, before he ever answers Owl’s question, he rushes off, saying, “Call me...I’m not in the book.” Probably all of us have had a similar experience – where someone knows the words but doesn’t get the meaning – they hear, but THEY DON’T LISTEN!

STORY: Hugh Downs told a great story about listening. Years ago, when he was working in radio, he watched an experienced colleague interview a man who had escaped from a Kremlin prison. The man told how it had taken him months to tunnel out. He dug and he dug, and he ate the dirt that he dug. When he figured that his tunnel was outside the prison walls, he began digging upward, trying to reach the surface. One midnight, he was finally ready to break through. He tunneled through a wooden platform above his head. He then told the interviewer, “When I put my head through the hole, I suddenly realized that I was in the middle of Josef Stalin’s office!” The man paused, and at that point the interviewer said, “So, do you have any hobbies?” HE WASN’T LISTENING. This seasoned veteran wasn’t paying attention to the man he was interviewing. Hugh Downs said that it taught him a tremendous lesson about the art of interview: LISTEN WHEN PEOPLE TALK. People who really listen are few and far between, but NEHEMIAH LISTENED. He was able to restore people’s hope and enthusiasm because HE LISTENED. He knew their needs because HE LISTENED. In the few words spoken in verse 10, Nehemiah heard enough to reverse the momentum – because HE LISTENED. And when Nehemiah listened, this is what he heard. First of all, the people said...

1. **“WE HAVE LOST OUR STRENGTH.”** ¹⁰“...the people in Judah said, ‘The strength of the laborers is giving out...’” Notice what Nehemiah did in response: ¹³“Therefore I stationed some of the people behind the wall...posting them by families...” Nehemiah knew that families could work well together. He knew that putting families together would increase morale. It’s a fact of life that people work better when they are with people they enjoy. It gives them a chance to relax and be themselves. Also, since they were now working under the threat of enemy attack, family members were more at ease being near the people they loved most. During this time of trial, fathers wanted to work closely with their sons, and brother near brother. How did Nehemiah know to do this? How did he know to reorganize the workers according to families? HE LISTENED. He listened to the problem, and he looked for a solution. The people were tired and discouraged, and Nehemiah was able to reverse the momentum by making some changes that gave greater consideration to their needs. Next, Nehemiah heard them say...
2. **“WE HAVE LOST OUR VISION.”** ¹⁰“...there is so much rubble...” They had started out doing a great work for God. They had reached the halfway point, and now all they could see was rubble, AND all they could think about was the impending enemy attack. ¹²“The Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, ‘Wherever you turn, they will attack us.’” The people had lost their vision. So what did Nehemiah do? He restored their vision by reminding them that this project was designed for God’s glory, and that God is great and awesome, and that God has the power to protect His people. ¹⁴“...I 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.’” How did Nehemiah know that this is what needed to be said? HE LISTENED. When the people said, “there is too much rubble,” he recognized that they had lost their vision. He listened to the problem and he looked for a solution. Next, Nehemiah heard them say...
3. **“WE HAVE LOST OUR CONFIDENCE.”** ¹⁰“...we cannot rebuild the wall.” The people had lost faith in their ability to finish the project. Notice that nowhere in this passage does Nehemiah lambast his workers. Consider Nehemiah’s situation; he was under tremendous stress. There were times when the project looked hopeless to him, too. He, too, was tired. He, too, could see the rubble. He, too, could hear the enemy’s threats. He knew the people were discouraged. When a leader is under pressure, he needs the people with him to be strong and Nehemiah’s people were letting him down. The easiest thing for him to do would have been to yell and scream, threaten and ridicule. Nehemiah didn’t do that. Why not? Because HE LISTENED to his people. He heard them

say they lacked confidence. And he knew that you can't restore someone's confidence by insulting them. This seems rather obvious, but it's amazing how many leaders forget it when the pressure is on. How did Nehemiah restore their confidence? In verse 14, he reminded them of God's greatness, and he encouraged them to fight for their families. And in verse 20, he promised them that they could depend on God's help. ²⁰*"Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!"* How did Nehemiah know that the people needed a pep talk and not a kick in the pants? He heard the people and HE LISTENED to what they were saying.

- 4. CONCLUSION.** Chris Conway is a single parent – the father of two teenage sons. The boys had gotten involved with a youth group and were enthusiastic about it. Mr. Conway asked them what they liked about the group, and the older son answered, "We can tell the leaders really care about us by the way they listen to us." This surprised Conway, and he said, "I listen to you." His son said, "I know that. But you are usually doing something else. All you ever say is 'yes,' 'no,' or 'I'll think about it.'" At that moment, Chris Conway decided that he was going to focus on listening to his sons. At dinner each night, whenever one of the boys would speak, he would stop eating, set down his fork, turn to him and listen. This revolutionized his relationship with his sons. And since he spent so much time listening at the dinner table, he lost fifteen pounds during the first five weeks. Most importantly, the average length of their evening meal went from less than ten minutes to almost forty-five. Listening takes effort – that is why lazy leaders don't like to listen. But, great leaders do. And followers can tell the difference. It's been said that nobody is more persuasive than a good listener. Nehemiah faced the problems of low morale and loss of momentum. In order to set the momentum moving in the right direction, he needed to help them restore their strength, their vision and their confidence. But, please, don't make the mistake of thinking you just heard a three-point sermon on how to reverse momentum. That's not what this is. It is a one-point sermon on how leaders can deal with most any problem involving other people. What is the secret? LISTEN!