

Have you ever identified with a group of people that caused you to feel a tremendous sense of pride, belonging, or commitment? I felt proud to be a Southwest Airlines employee, especially when I flew other airlines. The company motto is “Doing the right thing.” I wholeheartedly embraced it; it fit!

My son works for IBM, and he’s proud to be a member of a company which enjoys a good public perception. It gives him a sense of unity with something that’s bigger than you are, a community of people dedicated to a common goal.

Sometimes universities or sports teams develop a certain reputation. The US National Soccer Team is trying to do just that. A “Johnny-come-lately” in the international arena, the team has done amazingly well lately. But last Sunday after a gut-wrenching loss a commentator said, “Perhaps your run has gained respect for US Soccer,” to which their coach replied, “We don’t want respect; we want to win!” They are fighters.

There are other organizations that create pride and respect, like the Marines. I asked our member who is a Marine and he told me, “we are *the Few, the Proud;*” First to Fight. Their motto is their way of life: “*Always Faithful*” (Semper Fidelis)

The Air Force’s mission is, “*Fly, fight, win!*” They value: “Integrity first, service before self, excellence in all we do.” Both these military organizations call their members “warriors.” I feel proud to have armed services with these values, and I pray that they will pass them on to the next generation of “warriors.”

Israel, in 445 B.C.E., even though it had been demoralized by the exile and the destruction of Jerusalem, had a sense of pride. They believed the defeat and exile were humiliating, but temporary. Nehemiah had said to the people: “Let’s rebuild so that we no longer suffer disgrace!” And they did. Their pride in being Israel and their reputation as “God’s holy nation” drove them to overcome the shame so they could regain their place among the nations.

The people had a special identity as God’s people – just read the Psalms and you will hear it. “Our Lord is king among the nations” (Ps 96), “Our God has cared for us in power.” Our God relates to individuals; he’s not some stone or statue you pay homage to – God answers prayer, God has compassion; God fights for and protects us. (Ps 105). This was their heritage. This faith was in them, even though they had not really been practicing their faith due to discouragement and having been dispersed.

But now, with Nehemiah calling them to this task, they reconnected with that pride and identity. They belonged to a God who was bigger than them, who would help them; a holy God, a God of integrity.

Do you have that sense of pride and commitment about belonging to Christ? Do you proudly identify yourself as a Christian? Or do you cover up that fact in public? Are you intimidated by the enemy – by those around you who ridicule Christians? We have enemies who will come against us just like in this story.

The attack on the Jews literally came from all sides, Sanballat (Samaria to the north), Arabs from the south, Ammonites to the east, Ashdodites to the west. When Sanballat heard that they were building the wall, he flew into a rage and mocked the Jews. Trying to mobilize the others against them, he exploded, "What does this bunch of poor, feeble Jews think they're doing? Building a wall in a day? Do they actually think they can make something of stones from a rubbish heap-- and charred ones at that?" Tobiah the Ammonite, piped up, "That stone wall would collapse if even a fox walked along the top of it!"

Those were fighting words, so Nehemiah prayed, "Hear us, our God, we are being mocked. May their ridicule fall on their own heads, and may they be captured and enslaved in a foreign land! Don't forgive them! Don't blot out their sins, for they have insulted you right here in front of the builders." You see, the Jews' identity was so closely tied to God, that to mock and ridicule them was to ridicule God. So Nehemiah could justify going to a "war of words" in prayer. Nehemiah defended God's honor.

And at first the people continued working, intensely committed until soon they had completed the wall to half its height around the entire city. But when those naysayers heard that the work was going ahead despite their threats and that the gaps in the wall were being repaired, they were furious. They determined to fight to stop the work.

This time not just Nehemiah prayed, but all the people prayed to God and guarded the city day and night to protect themselves. (Neh 4:7-8)

Are you so connected to the faith that if the faith was threatened you would stand up and fight together against opposition at all odds?

Remember, these were demoralized people whose faith had been damaged by difficult life circumstances. They were just reconnecting after years of exile. They were awakening to what it's like to once again have faith and see God's vision for their city. **That vision was a good one – a vision of rebuilding and renewal; one of being a community again.**

But after awhile they lost sight of all the progress they had made and anxiety and discouragement crept in. They complained, "The workers are getting tired, and there is so much rubble to be moved. We're in over our heads and will never be able to build the wall" (4:10).

The minute a team goes into that attitude, it's anathema. They are headed for a loss. And that's what happened here. The enemy gained advantage, saying, "Before they know what's happening, we will swoop down on them and kill them and end their work." When they heard this, the Jews who lived on the outskirts of town near the enemy panicked and told us again and again, "They will come from all directions and attack us!" Fear took over and the project was severely threatened.

But Nehemiah didn't panic. He knew two things: these people loved their families and wanted them to continue as a nation. And he knew something else, God has started this vision and God would faithfully see it through.

Seeing the vision means everything.

Take England during World War II. British and allied troops numbering 338,000 were fighting in France when they were pushed back onto the beaches of Dunkirk by Germany and there was no escape. The worst disaster in history was certain. The war could be lost right here. A rescue mission had been organized, but due to various obstacles Operation Dynamo was only able to save 8,000 troops over four to five days. In desperation the Vice Admiral made a public cry for help, asking anyone with any kind of boat to assist. He got a huge and immediate response from English citizens. 700 "little ships" made up of all kinds of small public and private boats, along with 220 war ships went back and forth across the English Channel carrying these troops until all 338,000 were evacuated in just nine days.¹

Winston Churchill prepared himself for the greatest military disaster in history, but instead, because of the people's commitment to fight for those soldiers, he called it a "miracle of deliverance achieved by valor, by perseverance, and faultless service."² The people risked their own lives right alongside the troops, believing that their effort mattered. And God made the way happen for them, through favorably calm waters and fog that hid them as they crossed.

Nehemiah stood together with the people. He listened and responded, placing armed guards at the most vulnerable places. He stationed the people by families, giving them weapons. After arming them he assessed the situation. He called them all together and told them, "Don't be afraid of the enemy! Remember the Lord, who is great and glorious, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes!" (4:13-14)

Nehemiah's encouragement to trust the Lord reminded them of God's power. Because they didn't shrink back, the enemy's intimidation tactics were turned right back on their own heads. The Jews overcame their discouragement because families were present, letting them see what they were fighting for. They were victorious and the work continued.

We too have an enemy committed to destroy us. Satan was alive and well then and attacks us now. Christian values will always be attacked, whether here or on the mission field. You cannot escape it. But God has provided weapons to defend the faith. We have the belt of truth, and the body armor of God's righteousness. We are protected by the shield of faith and the sword of the Spirit. You see God stands with us just like God stood with Nehemiah and his people.

How well are you connected with God so you can stand strong? How strongly are you living the faith? Are you weak, filling your life with every other thing? Nehemiah took no chances. He was totally connected to God in prayer. Then, a man of integrity, when opposition came he did not go mum or cut and run. He stood up and mobilized everyone to fight.

¹Adams, G. J. (2007, August 22). *The WWII Battle Of Dunkirk*. Retrieved July 3, 2009, from <http://ezinearticles.com/?The-WWII-Battle-Of-Dunkirk&id=699718>

²To hear Winston Churchill's speech on Dunkirk, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ojtm7Pb1QLM>

From that point on, half the men worked while the other half stood guard in constant armed readiness. He stationed some as a militia, listening for the call of trumpets if their defense should be necessary. The laborers also did their work, one hand supporting their load and one hand holding a weapon, sword belted to their side. Together they all stood.

Nehemiah said, although spread out throughout the city, we are one team. And if attacked, our God will fight for us!"

Do you have such confidence in God's presence and goodwill, sensing partnership with God and one another? When we take this stand together, whether it's a personal difficulty or a concern of the entire church here at FPCD, God is a very present help in trouble. God is steadfast in love, helping His gospel to stand.

God has been shaping us over the past year, guiding us so we can become strong and focused and do miraculous things. It takes commitment and willingness though. Are you passionately committed to the task? To not be passionate about our faith is to not fight at all and simply give the enemy territory. And the enemy will take it.

Nehemiah and the people worked from sunrise to sunset, guarding the work 24/7, not even taking off their clothes.

That's the kind of commitment it takes, and God saw them through miraculously. Throughout opposition and fear and discouragement, they put their hand to the plough, and God fought for them to the victory!

AMEN