Silencing Sanballat

He [Sanballat] ridiculed the Jews, and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said, "What are those feeble Jews doing?" (Nehemiah 4:1b–2)

Scripture: Nehemiah 4: 15-23
Song: "Be Strong in the Lord"

My jaw dropped when I learned the English department of my regional campus would not clear me to teach freshman composition, even though I had majored in English and had taught the course successfully at another regional campus. And the more I tried to make my case, the more they resisted. Even when the chair of the department gave me a positive recommendation, it wasn't enough.

Similarly, it didn't matter what the Jews did, how diligent they were, or how pure their motives were. Sanballat and his men ridiculed them and found fault with everything they did. Sanballat had an adversarial mindset that wasn't going to change. But the Israelites persevered in steadfast faith and practical wisdom, and God ultimately granted them victory.

The English department never cleared me to teach freshman composition—but I was unexpectedly invited to teach an upper-level course that should have been out of my reach. Victories often come about in unexpected ways. But this passage reminds us to persevere, to take the necessary action, and—most of all—to trust God.

Father, please help me trust You when the battle rages and the opposition is intense. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

February 23–28. **Lorraine Ray** lives in Tennessee and is an author, grandmother, Bible study leader, and musician.

The Game

"Accept one another then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God." (Romans 15:7)

Scripture: Romans 15: 1–17
Song: "They'll Know We are Christians by Our Love"

My dad and I were watching the Ohio State vs. Michigan football game—a rivalry so infamous that it is often referred called "The Game." Unfortunately, we were rooting for opposing teams, and things got tense when his team was not performing well. Needless to say, he was not in the best mood.

Besides being a fan of the opposing football team, my dad was also an unbeliever, and I passionately longed to influence him for Christ. But that day my passion was unbridled. It was surely not the time for me to throw my "yellow flag" to call a penalty. But I did. And, though I was able to ignore a few choice expletives, when he angrily misused the Lord's name, I called him on it. He was livid.

Had I been more mature in my faith, I might have remembered that "gentleness and respect" are more impactful for Christ than condemnation or criticism—perhaps especially so toward unbelievers. And today's passage from Romans reminds me that accepting others as God accepted me is an offering of praise. Yes, I was passionate about wanting my dad to know Christ, but I could have relied more on Him and less on my own emotion. As a result, instead of scoring a touchdown for God's team, I fumbled.

Father, thank You for graciously accepting me, failures and all. Instead of criticizing others, may I honor You by accepting them in love and being sensitive to their needs. Only You can change hearts—including mine. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

The Wimpy Disciple

"Do not say to your neighbor, come back tomorrow and I'll give it you—when you already have it with you." (Proverbs 3:28)

Scripture: Proverbs 3:27–32
Song: "Help Us to Help Each Other"

My friend was experiencing a devastating financial setback after recovering from some serious medical issues. She was a cherished former student, and I very much wanted to help her. But for some reason, I kept putting it off. Was I hoping the desire would go away? Was I hoping she'd report that her needs had already been met? It was a selfish kind of procrastination.

When I read these verses in Proverbs, I think of Wimpy, the Popeye cartoon character who ate hamburgers by the dozen but always put off paying for them. His infamous line was, "I'll gladly pay you Tuesday for a hamburger today." Wasn't I doing the same thing? I was essentially telling my friend to "come back tomorrow," when I had the ability to help right away. In fact, I had even received an unexpected check, and it felt as if God was nudging me to give what I had received.

Ultimately, I did help. And the good it did was worth far more than the money would have done sitting in my account. Plus, the joy it added to my heart was worth even more. Why did I have to wait 'til "Tuesday" to do the good thing?

Father, please show me where my good intentions are shallow and give me the immediate desire to do what is right in Your eyes. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Paved with Good Intentions

"Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore, fear God." (Ecclesiastes 5:7)

Scripture: Ecclesiastes 5:1–8
Song: "Be Kind to Each Other"

During a vibrant time of prayer, I asked God to make me a special blessing to someone. But when the opportunity came, I was completely oblivious. I was returning an online order from Walmart, and the delivery worker came to my front door to pick it up. She walked heavily and also wore a knee brace. It was clearly a feat for her to make it up the driveway and then up the steep steps of my porch. I stood there and watched, thinking only of the instant refund I would soon be receiving.

The moment she left, it hit me. Why, oh why, did I not walk outside and meet her with my item? It would have made her job just a little easier. But I had been oblivious to everything apart from my own agenda. I was in tears when I realized the opportunity I missed and how easy it would have been to help. I know God will give me other opportunities, but this one will never come again.

As today's verse suggests, my words and my dreaming had become utterly meaningless. As the saying goes, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions."

Father, I often have good intentions but fail to act. Please forgive me and keep me always alert and ready to act in joyful obedience. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Paid in Full

"So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me." (Philemon 17–18)

Scripture: Philemon 10–21
Song: "Amazing Grace"

I had just given birth and was taken aback to learn that my insurance company would not pay for any of the medical expenses. Why? It was 1977, and I was unmarried. This was an emotional blow and a devastating financial burden. The hospital staff directed me to a special bureau where I could arrange to pay in small increments. What happened there, however, was not at all what I expected. Instead of drafting a payment schedule, they concluded I could not afford to pay it at all. I learned they were affiliated with United Way and had access to discretionary funds; they said they would pay my entire bill!

They did for me what Paul did for Onesimus when he said, "If he owes you anything, charge it to me." Paul treated Onesimus as a brother. When the hospital bureau gave me this financial gift, I experienced an Onesimus moment myself, a moment I would later understand as grace.

One year after receiving this gift, I was employed full-time as a university faculty member and had become financially stable. When I was asked by the dean of the university to chair the United Way drive on campus—the same fund from which my hospital bill had been paid—I knew it was a divine call. I ended up chairing the drive for three years, and each time we exceeded our goal. It was as if God then whispered to me, "Paid in full."

Father, please enable me to give grace to others unconditionally. After all, that is what makes grace, grace; and it is truly amazing. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Ordinary Service

"As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead." (James 2:26)

Scripture: James 2:14–26
Song: "The Servant Song"

What do I love to do on my days off? I can completely lose myself in shopping, especially at off-price stores. However, when I go to those stores, certain things really annoy me: clothes knocked off the rack and left on the floor is a big one. And I'm really judgy about it too. *Didn't your mother ever teach you to pick up after yourself?*

Coincidentally (or not), I recently took a spiritual gifts assessment where I scored low in "helpfulness." And, when I read this passage from James, I really began to wonder if my faith was dead. Here I was being critical of others but not doing much myself.

Thankfully, God gave me clarity. He reminded me of ways I am serving, and the thought arose in my heart, "Instead of being grumpy about clothes on the floor, why don't I start picking them up and hanging them back on the rack? That is service. And it's even sacrificial, with no reward." I did—and it's become my regular thing, a small act of obedience, perfect for ordinary days.

Father, thank You for teaching me that faith without deeds is dead. Please help me to be more aware of the limitless possibilities to serve that can make ordinary days, extraordinary. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.