

Nehemiah 04 - The Wall Defended Against Enemies

I. Rebuilding of the wall (Neh 1:1—7:23)

- (2) Nehemiah rebuilds the wall despite much opposition (Neh 3:1—6:19)
 - (B) Opposition to the rebuilding of the wall (Neh 4:1—6:19)
 - (a) External threats (4:1-9)
 - (i) Ridicule from Sanballat and Tobiah (4:1-6)
 - (a) Attack: ridicule (4:1-3)
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 - (i) Discouragement (4:10-23)
 - (a) Attack: discouragement (4:10-12)
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Neh 3 might give the impression that once Nehemiah had carefully assigned everyone to a particular section of the wall, from that time on everything progressed smoothly. Not so! God's work seldom goes forward without opposition.

Nehemiah 4

(B) Opposition to the rebuilding of the wall (Neh 4:1—6:19)

- (a) External threats (4:1-9)
 - (i) Ridicule from Sanballat and Tobiah (4:1-6)
 - (a) Attack: ridicule (4:1-3)

1 Now it came about that when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became furious and very angry, and he mocked the **Jews**.

1 Now it came about that when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became furious and very angry and mocked the Jews.

1 When Sanballat heard that we were reconstructing the wall, he flew into a rage, became indignant, and mocked the Jews.

1 But it came to pass, that when Sanballat heard that we builded the wall, he was wroth, and took great indignation, and mocked the Jews.

– "...Jews" – after the Babylonian captivity, the terms "Jew" and "Israelite" are used interchangeably

— Ezra calls the returning remnant "Jews" 8x and "Israel" 40x. (Ezra also speaks of "all Israel": Ezra 2:70; 3:11; 8:35; 10:25, et al.)

— Nehemiah uses the term "Jew" 11x and "Israel" 22x. Nehemiah too speaks of "all Israel" being back in the land (Neh 12:47). The remnant that returned from Babylon is represented as "the nation" (Mal 1:1, et al.).

The same is true in the NT. Our Lord is said to have offered Himself to the nation, "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt 10:5-6; 15:24). Tribes other than Judah are mentioned specifically in the NT as being represented in the land. Anna knew her tribal identity was of the tribe of Asher (Luke 2:36). Paul knew he was of the tribe of Benjamin, a "Jew" and an "Israelite" (Rom 11:1). The NT speaks of "Israel" 70x [KJV] and uses the word "Jew" 196x [KJV]. At the Feast of Pentecost Peter cries, "Ye men of Judea" (Acts 2:14), "ye men of Israel..." (Acts 2:22), and "All the house of Israel" (Acts 2:36).

2 And he spoke in the presence of his brothers and the wealthy people of Samaria and said, "What are these feeble Jews doing? Are they going to restore *the temple* for themselves? Can they offer sacrifices? Can they finish *it* in a day? Can they revive the stones from the heaps of rubble, even the burned ones?"

2 He spoke in the presence of his brothers and the wealthy *men* of Samaria and said, "What are these feeble Jews doing? Are they going to restore *it* for themselves? Can they offer sacrifices? Can they finish in a day? Can they revive the stones from the dusty rubble even the burned ones?"

2 He addressed his allies and the Samaritan officials, saying "What are these pathetic Jews doing? Are they intending to rebuild it by themselves? Do they intend to offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a single day? Can they make stones from this burned out rubble?"

2 And he spake before his brethren and the army of Samaria, and said, What do these feeble Jews? will they fortify themselves? will they sacrifice? will they make an end in a day? will they revive the stones out of the heaps of the rubbish which are burned?

3 Now Tobiah the Ammonite was near him, and he said, "Even what they are building—if a fox were to jump *on it*, it would break their stone wall down!"

3 Now Tobiah the Ammonite was near him and he said, "Even what they are building—if a fox should jump *on it*, he would break their stone wall down!"

3 Tobiah the Ammonite stood to the side, commenting, "If a fox were to jump onto what they're building, it would collapse their stone wall!"

3 Now Tobiah the Ammonite was by him, and he said, Even that which they build, if a fox go up, he shall even break down their stone wall.

- As noted earlier (2:10), Sanballat was displeased when he heard that Nehemiah had returned to Jerusalem to help the Jews

— Sanballat, however, did not know of God's interest in His people

- Sanballat's displeasure turned to intense anger (4:1; Cf. v7). So with his associates, including Tobiah (2:19; 4:3; also Cf. v7; 6:1,12,14) and Geshem (2:19), and in the presence of Samaritan soldiers, Sanballat ridiculed the Jews.

— He accused them of rebelling against King Artaxerxes (2:19) and by a series of questions he suggested they were incapable of completing the project (4:2)

— Calling them feeble, he asked if they would offer sacrifices. That is, could they possibly complete the walls so that they could then give sacrifices of thanksgiving?

The question about finishing in a day suggests that the Jews did not know what they were undertaking. And how, Sanballat asked, could they use burned, weakened bricks from the heaps of debris? Tobiah the Ammonite (Cf. 2:19), standing nearby, also tried to discourage the Jews. Ridiculing them, he said they were so inept in their work that a fox, weighing only a few pounds, would break it down by merely climbing up on it.

(b) Answer: Nehemiah's imprecation (4:4-6)

4 Hear, O our God, how we are *an object of contempt!* Return their taunting on their own heads, and turn them into plunder in a land of captivity.

4 Hear, O our God, how we are despised! Return their reproach on their own heads and give them up for plunder in a land of captivity.

4 "Listen, our God, because we are being mocked. Let their insults fall back on them, and let them be dragged away as captives into exile.

4 Hear, O our God; for we are despised: and turn their reproach upon their own head, and give them for a prey in the land of captivity:

5 Do not forgive their guilt and do not let their sin be wiped out before You, for they have demoralized the builders.

5 Do not forgive their iniquity and let not their sin be blotted out before You, for they have demoralized the builders.

5 Don't atone their iniquity, and don't let their sin be blotted out from before you, because they have demoralized the builders."

5 And cover not their iniquity, and let not their sin be blotted out from before thee: for they have provoked thee to anger before the builders.

- Prayer was a distinct and consistent part of Nehemiah's approach to problem-solving

— When faced with Sanballat's demoralizing attack, he immediately asked God for help: Hear us, O our God, for we are despised

Like some of the imprecatory prayers in which the psalmists invoked God's condemnation on His enemies, Nehemiah's prayer in this instance was severe and condemning. He prayed that Sanballat and his cohorts would be taken captive and that they would be judged for their sins.

- How should a Christian interpret this kind of praying, especially in view of what Jesus Christ said about praying for one's enemies (Matt 5:44; Cf. Rom 12:14,20)? Several facts need to be noted:

1. In opposing the Jews, Sanballat and company were actually opposing God.
2. God had already pronounced judgment on Israel's enemies. Nehemiah was praying according to God's will—that God would deliver Jerusalem from her enemies (Josh 1:5).
3. Nehemiah was praying that God would bring about what He had promised Abraham regarding those who curse His people (Gen 12:3).
4. Vengeance belongs to God, not to Nehemiah or other believers (Cf. Deut 32:35; Rom 12:19).

6 So we built the wall, and the entire wall was joined together to half its *height*, for the people had a mind to work.

6 So we built the wall and the whole wall was joined together to half its *height*, for the people had a mind to work.

6 So we rebuilt the wall, completing it halfway up, because the people were committed to working.

6 So built we the wall; and all the wall was joined together unto the half thereof: for the people had a mind to work.

- After praying, Nehemiah and the Jews continued with the work

— Some Christians pray and then wait for things to happen, but not Nehemiah! As in all his efforts, he blended the divine perspective with the human.

— He faced Sanballat's opposition with both prayer and hard work. Once he committed the problem to the Lord, he trusted God to help them achieve their goal. And while praying and trusting, they rebuilt the wall to half its height.

At this juncture their task was half completed. Sanballat and Tobiah's efforts at demoralizing the Jews failed. The Jews rose above their enemies' attempts at

discouragement. Because the people worked so diligently and enthusiastically (with all their heart), they were able to complete half the job in a surprisingly short period of time. Nehemiah wrote later (6:15) that the entire task was completed in 52 days (about eight weeks of 6 days each), so possibly this halfway point took about four weeks.

Well begun is half done. — Ben Franklin

1. Opposition expresses negative emotions from the threat of something to lose (v1,7)
2. The opposition does diabolical doubt (v2-3)
3. The opposition isn't entirely incorrect (v2)
4. Opposition grows and conspires to create confusion (v7-8)
5. Opposition easily moves from external to internal (v10)
6. The opposition ramps up the threat level (v11)

How to overcome opposition:

1. Take it to God, not your critics (v4-5) - don't answer, respond or argue about it
2. Get moving in the right direction (v6)
3. Be prayerful and practical (v9)
4. Endure the most painful critics (v12)
5. Remember God's faithfulness in the past (v14)
6. Fight for a better future (v14)

(ii) Threat of violence (4:7-9)

(a) Attack: conspiracy to commit violence (4:7-8)

7 Now when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites heard that the repair of the walls of Jerusalem went on, *and* that the breaches began to be closed, they were very angry.

7 Now when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repair of the walls of Jerusalem went on, *and* that the breaches began to be closed, they were very angry.

7 But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites heard that the repair work on the Jerusalem wall was progressing and that its breaches were being repaired, they flew into a rage.

7 But it came to pass, that when Sanballat, and Tobiah, and the Arabians, and the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites, heard that the walls of Jerusalem were made up, and that the breaches began to be stopped, then they were very wroth,

8 So all of them conspired together to come to fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it.

- 8 All of them conspired together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause a disturbance in it.
- 8 So they all conspired together to invade and fight against Jerusalem, creating confusion there.
- 8 And conspired all of them together to come and to fight against Jerusalem, and to hinder it.

(b) Answer: posting a guard (4:9)

- 9 But we prayed to our God, and because of them we set up a guard against them day and night.
- 9 But we prayed to our God, and because of them we set up a guard against them day and night.
- 9 But we prayed to our God. We also set up guards day and night because of them.
- 9 Nevertheless we made our prayer unto our God, and set a watch against them day and night, because of them.
- The Jewish workers' rapid progress naturally increased the threat to their enemies, who became very angry (Cf. v1). So they decided to take more overt and corporate action.
- Joining Sanballat and the Samaritans from the north, Tobiah and the Ammonites from the east, Geshem (Cf. 2:19) and the Arabs from the south, were men from Ashdod, a Philistine city, from the west. They all plotted together to attack Jerusalem, apparently from all sides.

The corporate strategy of Judah's enemies was met by a corporate response. Again the people (we) prayed for help, and then added action to their prayers by posting a guard round the clock to meet this threat.

(b) Internal threats (Neh 4:10—5:19)

(i) Discouragement (4:10-23)

(a) Attack: discouragement (4:10-12)

- 10 And so in Judah it was said: "The strength of the burden bearers is failing, Yet there is much rubble; And we ourselves are unable To rebuild the wall."
- 10 Thus in Judah it was said, "The strength of the burden bearers is failing, Yet there is much rubbish; And we ourselves are unable To rebuild the wall."
- 10 Meanwhile, the people of Judah said, "The builders are tired and there's so much rubble that we can't reconstruct the wall!"
- 10 And Judah said, The strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed, and there is much rubbish; so that we are not able to build the wall.

11 And our enemies said, "They will not know or see until we come among them, kill them, and put a stop to the work."

11 Our enemies said, "They will not know or see until we come among them, kill them and put a stop to the work."

11 Our enemies said, "Before they notice or see us, we'll penetrate their midst, kill them, and stop the work!"

11 And our adversaries said, They shall not know, neither see, till we come in the midst among them, and slay them, and cause the work to cease.

12 When the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times, "They will come up against us from every place where you may turn,"

12 When the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times, "They will come up against us from every place where you may turn,"

12 The Jews who lived near them kept coming to us, reporting at least ten times, "They'll attack us from every direction."

12 And it came to pass, that when the Jews which dwelt by them came, they said unto us ten times, From all places whence ye shall return unto us they will be upon you.

- However, the problem was not automatically solved. In fact the builders faced some new problems. They were physically and psychologically exhausted and the work seemed endless (v10). Furthermore they faced the threat of a secret attack (v11) which Nehemiah knew was not idle talk.

(b) Answer: encouragement through reminders of God's sovereignty and strategic defensive planning (4:13-23)

13 then I stationed *men* in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, the exposed places, and I stationed the people in families with their swords, spears, and bows.

13 then I stationed *men* in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, the exposed places, and I stationed the people in families with their swords, spears and bows.

13 So I stationed the people by families behind the wall in the lower exposed areas, equipping them with their swords, spears, and bows.

13 Therefore set I in the lower places behind the wall, and on the higher places, I even set the people after their families with their swords, their spears, and their bows.

14 When I saw *their* fear, I stood and said to the nobles, the officials, and the rest of the people: "Do not be afraid of them; remember the Lord who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses."

14 When I saw *their* fear, I rose and spoke to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people: "Do not be afraid of them; remember the Lord who is great and awesome, and fight

for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives and your houses."

14 Looking things over, I stood up and spoke to the officials, the military leaders, and the rest of the people: "Don't fear them. Remember the great and awe-inspiring Lord. Fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes."

14 And I looked, and rose up, and said unto the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the people, Be not ye afraid of them: remember the Lord, which is great and terrible, and fight for your brethren, your sons, and your daughters, your wives, and your houses.

15 Now when our enemies heard that it was known to us, and that God had frustrated their plan, then all of us returned to the wall, each one to his work.

15 When our enemies heard that it was known to us, and that God had frustrated their plan, then all of us returned to the wall, each one to his work.

15 Our opponents heard that we had learned about them, that God had brought their plans to failure, and that each and every one of us had come to work on the wall.

15 And it came to pass, when our enemies heard that it was known unto us, and God had brought their counsel to nought, that we returned all of us to the wall, every one unto his work.

- Nehemiah established a new strategy to meet the threat of enemy infiltration. He positioned some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall with swords, spears, and bows.

This must have been a difficult decision for Nehemiah. To place whole families together—including women and children—put tremendous pressure on fathers particularly. In case of outright attack, they would have no choice but to stay and fight for and with their family members. But Nehemiah knew it was the only decision he could make if they were to survive and succeed in rebuilding the walls.

Obviously fear gripped these people. So Nehemiah gathered them together and charged them to face the situation courageously (don't be afraid) and to remember the great and awesome Lord (Cf. 1:5) who was on their side, and to fight to save their families. When their enemies heard that their plot had been discovered, they did not attack and the people resumed their construction work.

16 And from that day on, half of my servants carried on the work while half of them kept hold of the spears, the shields, the bows, and the coats of mail; and the captains were behind all the house of Judah.

16 From that day on, half of my servants carried on the work while half of them held the spears, the shields, the bows and the breastplates; and the captains were behind the whole house of Judah.

16 From that day on, half of my helpers engaged in the work while the other half kept spears, shields, bows, and armor ready. The senior officials backed all of the Judeans
16 And it came to pass from that time forth, that the half of my servants wrought in the work, and the other half of them held both the spears, the shields, and the bows, and the habergeons; and the rulers were behind all the house of Judah.

17 Those who were rebuilding the wall and those who carried burdens carried with one hand doing the work, and the other keeping hold of a weapon.

17 Those who were rebuilding the wall and those who carried burdens took *their* load with one hand doing the work and the other holding a weapon.

17 who worked on the wall. Those who carried building materials worked with one hand, carrying a spear in the other.

17 They which builded on the wall, and they that bare burdens, with those that laded, every one with one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other hand held a weapon.

18 As for the builders, each wore his sword strapped to his waist as he built, while the trumpeter *stood* near me.

18 As for the builders, each wore his sword girded at his side as he built, while the trumpeter *stood* near me.

18 Each builder worked with a sword strapped to his side, while a trumpeter remained beside me to sound an alarm.

18 For the builders, every one had his sword girded by his side, and so builded. And he that sounded the trumpet was by me.

- As the Jews continued their work they were more cautious. Nehemiah had half the men work while the other half guarded them with spears, shields, bows, and armor.

The officers in Jerusalem, who apparently had not yet been given responsibilities in the project, were enlisted to stand guard behind the workers. As some workers carried materials, presumably bricks and mortar, they each did so with one hand, while holding a weapon (probably a spear or sword) in the other. Each of the wall-workers (masons) worked with both hands but had his sword at his side. Though this arrangement meant fewer bricklayers were on the job, the work was well defended!

19 And I said to the nobles, the officials, and the rest of the people, "The work is great and extensive, and we are separated on the wall far from one another.

19 I said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "The work is great and extensive, and we are separated on the wall far from one another.

19 I told the officials, rulers, and the rest of the people, "The project is large and extensive, and we are separated from each other on the wall,

19 And I said unto the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the people, The work is great and large, and we are separated upon the wall, one far from another.

20 At whatever place you hear the sound of the trumpet, assemble to us there. Our God will fight for us."

20 At whatever place you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us."

20 so wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, come over to us, and our God will fight for us!"

20 In what place therefore ye hear the sound of the trumpet, resort ye thither unto us: our God shall fight for us.

- In addition Nehemiah stationed a trumpeter next to him—a man who would follow Nehemiah everywhere he went as he supervised the work.

- In case of an attack, the trumpet blast would rally the people to the place of attack. Again Nehemiah encouraged the people (Cf. 2:20; 4:14), this time stating that their God would fight for them.

21 So we carried on the work with half of them holding spears from dawn until the stars appeared.

21 So we carried on the work with half of them holding spears from dawn until the stars appeared.

21 So we worked hard, half of us holding spears from dawn to dusk.

21 So we laboured in the work: and half of them held the spears from the rising of the morning till the stars appeared.

22 At that time I also said to the people, "Each man with his servant shall spend the night within Jerusalem, so that they may be a guard for us by night and a laborer by day."

22 At that time I also said to the people, "Let each man with his servant spend the night within Jerusalem so that they may be a guard for us by night and a laborer by day."

22 At the same time I told the people, "Let's have everyone sleep at night inside Jerusalem with their servants, so they can guard us at night and work during the day.

22 Likewise at the same time said I unto the people, Let every one with his servant lodge within Jerusalem, that in the night they may be a guard to us, and labour on the day.

23 So neither I, my brothers, my servants, nor the men of the guard who followed me—none of us removed our clothes; each took his weapon even to the water.

23 So neither I, my brothers, my servants, nor the men of the guard who followed me, none of us removed our clothes, each *took* his weapon even to the water.

23 No one—neither I, my allies, my servants, nor the bodyguards who accompanied me—changed clothes. Everyone carried a weapon even while going for water."

23 So neither I, nor my brethren, nor my servants, nor the men of the guard which followed me, none of us put off our clothes, saving that every one put them off for washing.

- The people worked diligently, from early morning till nighttime

— Those living outside the city did not even return to their homes. Venturing outside Jerusalem at night would have been a dangerous risk.

— Through each night some workers stood guard, knowing the city was vulnerable to attack even then. They did not even take off their clothes to clean up after work; they kept a diligent watch at all times.