

Building in the Face of Opposition (Nehemiah 4)

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[0 : 0 0] Nehemiah 4, 1-23 When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed.

He ridiculed the Jews, and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said, What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall?

Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble, burned as they are? Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, What they are building, even a fox climbing up on it, would break down their wall of stones.

Hear us, our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders.

So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart. But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the people of Ashdod heard that the repairs to Jerusalem's walls had gone ahead and that the gaps were being closed, they were very angry.

[1 : 2 5] They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.

Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, The strength of the laborers is giving out and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall. Also our enemy said, Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work.

Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, Wherever you turn, they will attack us. Therefore, I stationed some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families with their swords, spears, and bows.

After I looked things over, I stood up and 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 families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes.

When our enemies heard that we were aware of their plot and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to our own work. From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows, and armor.

[2 : 5 5] The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah who were building the wall. Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other, and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked.

But the man who sounded the trumpet stayed with me. Then I said to the nobles, the officials, and the rest of the people, The work is extensive and spread out, and we are widely separated from each other along the wall.

Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us. So we continued the work with half the men holding spears, from the first light of dawn till the stars came out.

At that time, I also said to the people, Have every man and his helper stay inside Jerusalem at night, so they can serve us as guards by night and as workers by day.

Neither I nor my brothers nor my men nor the guards with me took off our clothes. Each had his weapon, even when he went for water. And that is the word of God.

[4 : 0 6] Thank you, Moriah. That was amazing. And our pastor, Sam. Yeah, thank you for reading that. That's wonderful. I always have to put this up.

How's everybody doing? It's really good to be here. Really good to be in Nehemiah. Such an exciting, challenging passage for us today. Let's pray as we come to God's word.

Heavenly Father, open our eyes to behold wonderful things in your word today. Remind us that you have no rival, and though at times faith and building your kingdom is hard.

You are here with us to fight for us. You are here to encourage us. So please do prepare us for wonderful service through this passage we pray. In Jesus' name.

Amen. What would it have been like to be part of this building project with Nehemiah? It's an extraordinary feat for Israel building this wall in 52 days.

[5 : 0 8] The wall around Jerusalem is most likely the inner city wall around the temple, estimated to have been about seven kilometers long. Population in the area is about 50,000.

And so can you imagine coming out with 50,000 people to build this wall? I think it would be a little bit like in East Auckland here if we decided, as is true, East Auckland is the best.

Stuff the rest of Auckland. Let's build a wall, Packaranga Plaza, all the way to Whitford Road. Seven Ks it is. 12 meters high. We'd go two and a half meters wide so you can drive your car along it.

What would it have been like to be part of a building project to come out and do that together? What a sense of purpose and unity and accomplishment we'd all feel together.

And I'm sure last week you got a sense of this unity and purpose that God's people had as they served together and built this wall. What would it have been like?

[6 : 0 5] Amazing. Amazing but also hard. That's what we see today. It was hard. Today, we share in a building project.

It's global. It's worldwide. Worked on by billions. When the New Testament calls us to build, it refers, of course, to God's church or to God's kingdom. We're described as living stones being built together.

Jesus said upon Peter's confession he would build his church. We're told to build on the foundation of Jesus, being careful how we do it. We are part of this building project of God's church and kingdom together.

Sometimes it's filled with that wonderful teamwork and unity and purpose that you heard about last week. And sometimes it can be hard, frustrating and exhausting.

We might find even that we have a bad attitude to the work. We might find that others are not on board or as enthusiastic as we are about building the church.

[7 : 1 3] We might find strong opposition to the gospel message. Why is this good thing so hard, we might wonder? Well, Nehemiah chapter 4 is here to say why it's hard.

It's hard because we're on a battlefield. Even if you've never thought about your Christian life as a fight, today is a good day to start thinking in that way.

So do keep your Bibles or phones open to Nehemiah 4 as we see how to live life on a battlefield from Nehemiah and the people of God.

First in Nehemiah 4, we see that we do truly build on a battlefield. I was on a battlefield not too long ago, a paintball battlefield that is, and let me tell you, I was deeply disappointed with the men at the stag do.

Most of who came from my church, so this is my problem, this is my shame, all of them brought overalls to put over their clothes because they didn't want to get hurt or muddy, right?

[8 : 17] One guy even put socks in his jocks. What type of men are we raising? Whereas my thought was, I'm the only dude, just in shorts and t-shirt, my thought is, if you want to, you kind of want it to hurt.

You want to have some real fear to get the adrenaline pumping. So you're sharp, you're at the top of your game, you're alert, you're performing at your best.

Now this is a rather crude illustration of the Christian life. You do need to be aware of dangers. You need to know that you're on a battlefield so that you know with seriousness that there's opposition.

So that you're alert and performing your Christian life with the aggression and the passion and the alertness that is needed. Because it is a beautiful picture.

Last week, chapter three, wasn't it? A unified people, all building together and achieving God's purposes. But it was actually very hard-fought experience on the ground.

[9 : 19] And in reality, look at verse one to three with me. Now when Sambalat heard that they were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged and he jeered at the Jews.

And he said in the presence of his brothers and of the army of Samaria, what are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore it for themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish up in a day?

Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish and burnt ones at that? Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him and said, yeah, what they are building, if a fox goes up on it, it will break down their stone wall.

Our God's enemies, they become angry at Israel and they mock them. There are geopolitical ramifications for Israel having defenses again in this area.

Sambalat wants to keep his power and control in this region. And there are these long-standing grudges between, national grudges between Israel and these other tribes.

[10 : 18] It's a really difficult situation Israel is in. And you know what, there is some truth to the mockery that is being hurled at them. He says, the Jews were feeble and in some ways they were.

They weren't a restored, strong nation by any means. They've just returned. And Sambalat says, they're building out of heaps of burnt rubbish. And that may have been true as well. They were rebuilding their wall out of the rubble of the old wall and the rubble of their city that had been burnt and destroyed.

In verse 8, they plot to come and fight against Israel to halt the building project. And in verse 7, the people mentioned are Sambalat and Tobiah, the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashtodites.

They are geographically from the north, south, east, and west. Sorry, north, south, and east. The west is sea. And so Israel is just absolutely surrounded.

And in verse 10, we see the effect that this has on God's people. The strength of those who bear the burden is falling. There is too much rubble.

[11 : 24] By ourselves, we will not be able to build the wall. They were discouraged because they were building on a battlefield. It's hard.

We can face discouragements as we build as well. We feel like we're building with rubble. You look at yourself, and if you're a living stone being built up, you look and feel a bit chipped.

You have sin or struggles that make you feel like you can't be part of God's building project. Perhaps your energy is too low. You feel your gifts are too small.

Fairly regularly, I think, what am I doing in pastoral ministry? There must be people more competent, godly, experienced, gifted than me. God needs better material to build his church than me.

Perhaps you look at other churches and think they're doing things so much better, so much more successful than us. Or you could become discouraged because the job seems too big.

[12 : 25] Go and make disciples of the nations. Who are we to do that? What a mammoth, impossible task. So you might have a little desire to do missions overseas, but it just seems too far away or too complicated, so you keep those desires small and unsaid.

You might look at our home here in New Zealand, see the churches and growing numerically and say, just woe is us. This is hard. This is too hard. But more than that, you do battle with your own flesh, your own godly, ungodly desires.

You battle against those who oppose you, who make you feel like your faith or unbelief worthy of mockery or accuse you of being unloving or archaic. You fight too against the devil who wants to discourage you, mock you for your faith, whisper lies to stop you really being passionate for God, cause you to question your faith.

Peter says, your enemy, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in your faith. So we're building on a battlefield.

That's the first thing we see from this passage, this first observation, and it can be discouraging. And if today you feel a bit lethargic in your faith and commitment to church or service or evangelism, then you need to wake up, take overalls off and be ready for a fight.

[13 : 56] Be ready for a struggle. But what do we do on the battlefield? Well, look at how Nehemiah responds to opposition. So second observation, on a battlefield we turn in faith to prayer and action.

Prayer and action. One of the reasons I love Nehemiah and you might be really enjoying this book is because it's so deeply personal. Nehemiah's prayers and thoughts are just popped in there.

The book is part administration but also part diary and so it's this lovely mix where we feel like we get to know Nehemiah. And this helps us to know how we should respond in times of discouragement.

So look at verse 4. Nehemiah gets straight to prayer. Hear, O our God, for we are despised. Turn back their taunts on their heads and give them up to be plundered in the land where they are captives.

Do not cover their guilt and let not their sins be blotted out from your sight for they have provoked you to anger in the presence of the builders. We pray asking for help.

[15 : 00] The discouragement we feel without God is true. They said we can't build this by ourselves. That was true. They needed God's help. You take God out of our lives, our equation and we are not enough in ourselves.

The task is too big. The enemy is too strong to face alone. We need God, his power to energize us, his strength to aggressively fight sin and his spirit to awaken alertness and go out into this world.

We need God to defeat our enemies, particularly our sin and Satan and opposition to the gospel. So we pray trusting God will help, trusting he will act in righteousness, that he won't overlook sin, that he won't allow the wicked to prosper in the end.

Nehemiah also remembers the Lord though. Look at verse 4 of this attention and direction towards God. Prayer and then remembrance. Verse 14, And I looked and arose and said to the nobles and to the officers and to the rest of the people, Do not be afraid.

Remember the Lord who is great and awesome and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives and your homes. He says, Remember the Lord who is great and awesome.

[16 : 19] Here is faith shown in prayer and a turning remembrance to God. This is what's needed when we feel discouraged. This is what's needed even when we don't feel discouraged, but particularly when we are discouraged.

Do rest your hopes and fears in God through prayer and remembrance. But it's not just faith and prayers and remembrance we see there. We also see action.

And Nehemiah prepares his people very intentionally and deliberately to fight. It's faith that drives action, but also action that reveals our need for faith.

So without ever doing anything great for God, Nehemiah would have had no need for deep dependence on God in prayer. Yet without this deep dependence on God, he never would have been able to act and do things great.

And so faith feeds action and action feed the need for faith. So Nehemiah acts in verse 13, he sent men to guard the building project.

[17 : 21] In verses 15 to 20, he divides his people into those working and those guarding, stations men behind the walls. He and his people are working while also holding weapons.

He makes sure people stay within the walls day and night and are so prepared on high alert, they need to be careful when they bathe or change clothes because they were so ready.

And this faith and action frustrates the enemies of God. These were brave men and women of faith who were taking a stand for God and with his people.

Israel was the people who were going to come and usher in the Lord Jesus and salvation to the whole world. And here they stand at this moment in salvation history to enable the coming of this Messiah Jesus who we trust in today.

brave men and women who were taking a stand for God. Prayerful and active. We build on a battlefield and so we must live with prayer and action.

[18 : 28] Are you ready to meet a discouragement or disappointment with faith in an awesome God and with his actions with prayer and with service? Do not be discouraged if the task feels too big or you feel too small or the opposition seems too stubborn.

You are building on a battlefield. This is expected. This is the place of faith and dependence. It is in this moment that you turn to God.

Help. But lastly we see on a battlefield we become all too aware, wonderfully aware, that God fights for us. This is the greatest encouragement.

God fights for us. Is it one of the best character archetypes? The older brother who looks after the younger brother, shows up when he's being bullied at school, guides him through new circumstances.

Well, God is like that. He has our back. He is an older brother who loves and looks after us. In verse 14, Nehemiah encourages the workers by saying, remember the Lord who is great and awesome.

[19 : 37] And in verse 20, by saying, our God will fight for us. They knew God would not abandon his people. This wasn't because Israel was strong or obedient or had everything together.

No, God wanted to use Israel to save the world. This was because of his grace and kindness and so God would protect this, his people. Today, as we serve God, we must remember that he fights for us.

He triumphed over sin and death and Satan at the cross. He works through his church so that even persecution cannot stop the spread of the gospel. And those familiar with the book of Revelation will know that now Jesus sits enthroned in victory and is coming again.

That even now, Jesus is in control. God will not let his church fail. He uses his church to save the world. He has a world to save.

He has his name to lift high and he will use the church and the people within his church to do that. So we're on a battlefield. We're fighting a battle.

[20 : 50] We win through faith, through prayerful dependence and deliberate action. We win because God is fighting for us. So be alert this week.

Forces will try and discourage you. Every day you'll face opposition which stops you from living in devotion to God and building up God's people.

And if you don't feel a sense of being on a battlefield, be careful that you're not surrendering all too easily. Act to fight sin. Act to move God's kingdom forward.

Act in faith and prayer, trusting that God will build his kingdom here. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we give thanks to you for this wonderful example of faith and action in Nehemiah.

Thank you for your people, their dependence on you, their willingness to stand up for you, and I pray that you would infuse and cause that same spirit to dwell in us, that we would be unashamed of the gospel, ready to share it despite opposition, that you would make us diligent to serve you and to serve your church with joy.

[22 : 04] Our Lord, please help us to overcome sin, temptation, and Satan this week by your power with prayer and with action we pray.

In Jesus' name, Amen.