

## Meeting Opposition with Prayer and Performance – Nehemiah 4:1-23

### Scripture Reading: Acts 14:19-22

#### Introduction

Have you ever noticed how, when the church begins to make any sort of progress, something comes along to distract, discourage, and derail

The fact is, Satan hates when the church is making progress and he will do whatever he can to stop it or, failing that, to at least slow it down

As Paul informed the young believers in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch –

[Acts 14:22b] *“Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God”*

That’s the reality that confronts the church and all her members in this fallen world because this is Satan’s domain for the time being and any progress made by the church threatens his hold on it

But knowing that spiritual opposition is certain to arise as we *“run...the spiritual race that is set before us”* can help us avoid becoming discouraged or from beginning to think that maybe God disapproves of what we are doing and that we should stop or change course immediately

Contrary to popular belief, the presence of opposition rather than its absence is often the surest sign of God’s approval

God never promised to prevent his people from being attacked

He promises to face the attacks with them and to fight for them and even to reward them for their suffering thereby turning the attacks and the suffering they cause into gain; but he often allows his people to face opposition even as they are faithfully and diligently obeying him

Last week at how Nehemiah listed those who were involved in the reconstruction of the wall and the specific areas they were responsible for and we noticed that Nehemiah did so as a kind of “flash forward” showing the end before giving the details

Now as we come to Chapter 4, we see Nehemiah turn to recording the details of the rebuilding and what things were like for the builders

And what we find is, as God begins the process of restoring his people from the disgrace that was a part of their judgment for disobedience, the Judeans face renewed opposition from their enemies

As a matter of fact, the progress they were making as they cooperated with God’s plan only served to provoke increased anger and animosity from those who opposed them

We met the leaders of the opposition in Chapter 2 – Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite and you will likely recall that these two gentlemen had familial ties to the Judeans

Satan often uses those who are close to the church or even part of the church to carry out his disruptive plans because attacks from those who are close often have the most effect

And you will remember that Sanballat and Tobiah responded to the news that the Judeans planned to rebuild the wall with contemptuous taunting and the accusation that they were rebelling against the king of Persia [Neh. 2:19]

Now in verse 1 of Chapter 4 [Neh. 4:1] that –

*“...when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews”*

The attack was initiated by Sanballat and whereas he had been greatly displeased by Nehemiah’s arrival to help the people of Israel, now that the work on the wall has begun he is “angry and greatly enraged”

But his chosen tool for disruption is still mockery as he made several derogatory statements “in the presence of his brothers and the army of Samaria”

We'll look at each of them in turn and then see how his mockery is met with prayer and persistence

## **I. Mockery is met with prayer and persistence**

Sanballat asks five very sarcastic questions publicly presumably with the intention that they will be carried to the Jews

Let's look at the questions as we find them in verse 2 [**Neh. 4:2**]

*"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 burned ones at that?"*

An attack of discouragement will always have a kernel of truth in it because it's that kernel of truth that becomes a seed of doubt that leads to discouragement

First he resorted to name-calling and suggesting that the Judeans weren't up to the task of rebuilding the wall for themselves

And it's true as we saw last week that there wasn't a skilled builder listed in the roster of builders

The wall was being rebuilt by ordinary townsmen how could they possibly hope to succeed?

Then Sanballat mocked their faith in God by suggesting that maybe if they offered sacrifices to God he would miraculously build the wall

Maybe they could pray the wall into existence

Then he suggests that they didn't understand the scope of the task and the length of time they would need to devote to it

And he finished up by suggesting that they didn't even have the material resources to build a proper wall

It's true that stones are typically weakened to the point of uselessness by fire and limestone, which was the likely material of the wall, becomes especially brittle and crumbles rather easily when burned

And we know that the gates were burned when the wall was destroyed so at least the stones around the gates would have been negatively affected

The intended message of the questions was that the people of Israel were out of their minds to think they could succeed

And then in verse 3 [**Neh. 4:3**] we see Tobiah chime in with his sarcastic insult –

*"Yes, what they are building—if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall!"*

Foxes are rather light creatures – topping out at less than 20 pounds – so he's using hyperbole to insinuate that the wall is truly sub-standard

Again, there was a bit of truth in all of their taunts which probably made them sting a bit

But they neglected the great truth that God was with them and God had promised to see them succeed

Notice that Nehemiah didn't jump to debate with Sanballat and Tobiah and he didn't defend the project directly by pointing out the good things about it – he took the matter to God in prayer

As we have already seen, that was Nehemiah's first instinct and his first priority when facing a difficult circumstance and that should also be the case in the church today

Prayer helps God's people form an accurate grid through which to view and understand what is happening and provides a proper, healthy perspective in trying situations

But the kind of prayer that Nehemiah prayed tends to make us at least a little uncomfortable because Nehemiah prayed an imprecatory prayer against his enemies

That is, he prayed for God to bring harm to his enemies

Let's read his prayer in its entirety and then break it down [**Neh. 4:4-5**] –

*Hear, O our God, for we are despised. Turn back their taunt on their own heads and give them up to be plundered in a land where they are captives. Do not cover their guilt, and let not their sin be blotted out from your sight, for they have provoked you to anger in the presence of the builders.*

First, Nehemiah asked for God to show that he was aware of the difficulty they were facing – he asked for a tangible sense of God's presence and concern

Then he asked God to go to war against his enemies because, as we see at the end of verse 5, "...they have provoked you in anger in the presence of the builders" – in other words, they have defied you publicly making this is your cause

He calls for God to:

"Turn back their taunts on their own heads"

"Give them up to be plundered in a land where they are captives"

"Do not cover their guilt and let not their sin be blotted out from your sight"

Notice that Nehemiah didn't ask God to do anything to his enemies other than cause them to suffer the same fate as the Jews had already suffered

He asked for the taunts to boomerang back onto Sanballat and Tobiah and the Jews had been sent into captivity because of their sin of disobedience and rebellion against God and repentance was necessary for the reconciliation

He wasn't seeking an escalation in how God would deal with their sin he asked for equity – he simply wanted justice to be done

Still, as I said earlier, these kinds of prayers make us a bit uncomfortable and we wonder if it's appropriate for God's people to pray this way today

Perhaps the most important thing we need to understand about proper imprecatory prayers is that the call must always be for God to judge his enemies and vindicate himself – they cannot be veiled pleas for personal vengeance on our part

The intention has to be asking God to restore and preserve justice and set things right for the sake of his holy name and reputation

And when God's people are under attack by those who are disobeying God's righteous expectations there is nothing wrong with seeking God's intervention against that evil

In part because the child of God is forgoing seeking personal vengeance and turning their enemies over to God and letting him deal with them as he sees fit trusting that he knows exactly what to do with them

We see this principle clearly stated in **Romans 12:19** –

*Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."*

In the end, the taunts and mockery had the effect of bringing about indignation rather than indecision among the Judeans and we see that they responded with renewed determination and resolve – "*the people had the mind to work*"

And they closed the gaps in the wall and completed it to half its finished height [**Neh. 4:6**]

Notice that while Nehemiah prayed for God to deal with his enemies, God instead worked in his people and renewed their determination without relieving their torment

It often works just that way as we ask God to work on and change someone we have a conflict with only to find that he first works on and changes us

And in this case God didn't smite Nehemiah's enemies; he strengthened his people so they continued on with the work in spite of the taunts

And as is often the case, the people's success was met with increased anger and as the wall came together even more enemies came together to plot a military response

As we'll see next, their threat of violence is met with prayer and preparation

## **II. Threatened violence is met with prayer and preparation**

Look with me at verses 7-8 [**Neh. 4:7-8**] –

*But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and that the breaches were beginning to be closed, they were very angry. And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it.*

Whether this was a real threat in the sense that the combined foes would have actually dared attack when Nehemiah had presented the letter of sanction from Artaxerxes is an open question

But their goal was to at least make such a strong showing in amassing troops that the Jews would be believe it and be frightened

After all, whether the Jews could count on the support of Persia at least a debatable question since Artaxerxes had stopped the work on the wall once before

And the nations listed show that Jerusalem was completely surrounded – Samaria lay to the north, the Arabs were to the south, Ammon was to the east, and Ashdod to the west

I would have to imagine things were quite tense behind the partial wall in Jerusalem

And it seems that the tactic worked to at least some degree because we see cracks beginning to form in the resolve of the Judeans and some began to buckle under the strain

In verse 10 [**Neh. 4:10**] we see that the general chatter in Jerusalem was that the work was too great after all

And in verse 12 [**Neh. 4:12**] we see that those who lived outside the city limits, and therefore outside the walls and whatever protection they afforded, were afraid and made repeated complaint –

We get a sense that their complaints began to wear on Nehemiah a bit as he remarks that they came ten times

And those complaints also served as a warning that the attack, should it come, would come from all directions which no doubt contributed to the sense of foreboding

But we want to notice Nehemiah's response in verse 9 [**Neh. 4:9**] was to pray to God and prepare for battle

They posted a 24-hour guard and then, ultimately, stopped the work altogether, armed the populace, and posted them at the most vulnerable spots along the wall [**Neh. 4:13**]

Then Nehemiah encouraged the people and urged them to not be afraid but to [**Neh. 4:14**] –

*“Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes.”*

Basically, he tells them that everything is on the line and pacifism isn't an option – they aren't off fighting on some foreign battlefield in a war they have little interest in; they are fighting for everything they hold dear

And in verse 15 [**Neh. 4:15**] we see that the tactic worked and when the enemies saw the response and, likely, witnessed or heard about their resolve, they backed off and everyone returned to building – but not in the same way as before

They didn't just lay down their arms and pick up their tools and go back to building as they had

This time, they remained vigilant and prepared against an attack

We see in the verses that follow that they cut their labor force in half as half of the people were committed to defense, the leaders took up a defensive position, those who supplied materials did so with one hand on a weapon, and the builders all had a sword strapped to their side

Nehemiah also developed a warning alert system whereby a trumpeter was ready to sound the alarm if any part of the wall was attacked so the entire city could rush to the spot and defend it

And they worked whenever there was light enough to work and slept with one eye open in the city each night not even bothering to get undressed unless they were bathing – they remained vigilant, prepared, and ready to respond

Did the Judeans lack faith because they took steps to defend themselves?

Hardly! Because as we're going to see next, having faith doesn't eliminate the need for action

### **III. Having faith doesn't eliminate the need for action**

Clearly, the Nehemiah and the Judeans had confidence in God – turning to him in prayer was always their first priority

Nehemiah recognized and reminded the people that God was with them and, should an attack materialize, that God would fight for them [**Neh. 4:20**]

But Nehemiah never allowed the people to think that there was nothing for them to do in their own defense and that they could just sit back and watch God fight the battle any more than they could sit back and watch God build the wall

God's sovereignty doesn't typically work like that and the promise of God's activity and superintendence is never a signal that God's people can be inactive or passive

That's why I have a problem with the popular Christian saying: "Let go and let God"

While I understand that most people understand that saying means to not get all worked up over things, it has, in many cases, become an excuse for sitting back and waiting for God to act on our behalf when God really wants to work through and empower our efforts

The story is told of the great missionary Hudson Taylor who was travelling to China on a sailing vessel

As it neared the channel between the southern Malay Peninsula and the island of Sumatra, Taylor heard an urgent knock on his door and upon answering it heard the captain tell him that the wind had died down and they were drifting toward an island of cannibals

Of course, Taylor asked what he could do and the captain answered he could pray that God would send wind

Taylor replied that he would indeed pray for wind but only if the sailors set the sails first

The captain protested that the sailors would think he was mad if he ordered them to set the sails when there was no wind but Taylor insisted and it was done as he asked

45 minutes later the captain returned to Taylor's quarters and told him he could stop praying because they had all the wind they could handle and were out of danger

Prayer doesn't negate the need for action on our part and most often the answer to our prayers lies in God working through our actions

Faith and work together will overcome the most imposing obstacles as it looks beyond them to the sovereign hand of God who can accomplish great things through our feeble efforts

And we see Nehemiah record in verse 21 [**Neh. 4:21**] – "*...so we labored at the work*"

And that's where we find the victory – not in the successful defense of the city – but in the work of God continuing

## Conclusion

We have the tendency in the church today to overbalance in the direction of faith over works

And when it comes to our **justification** that is entirely appropriate because we are justified by faith alone in Christ alone

But we need to be aware that there is a difference between our justification and our **sanctification** and that when it comes to sanctification, we are expected to work toward it

In **Philippians 2:12** Paul tells the believers in Philippi that very thing when he tells them to work out their own salvation with fear and trembling knowing that God is at work in them

No one “earns” their salvation by working and no one sanctifies himself or herself – both are due to the working of God but when it comes to sanctification God works through each believer to bring it about

And the duties and obligations that rest on us as God’s children must be carried out with the same determination, endurance, and faith as was manifested by Nehemiah and the faithful Judeans who were with him

Because, without duty, faithfulness, and perseverance the Christian life can become far too passive to the point it atrophies and declines rather than growing

When Paul told Timothy to “*train [himself] for godliness*” in **1Timothy 4:7** he revealed that the Christian life always contains an element of struggle and effort that must be overcome with sweat and rigorous, intentional effort

And when we let spiritual disciplines slide we find that the result is spiritual weakness just as the body loses its shape and becomes less effective without exercise and use

So the Judeans prayed and trusted completely in God as they made wise preparations for their defense and continued building the wall

They knew they had to do those things if God’s work was going to be completed successfully because God had given them the work to do

Christ-followers today need to be of the same attitude

We know we have work to do and we know that when we do it we will face opposition

So we must always be praying to God to align ourselves with him as we put our complete trust in him and then be working on the work God has given us both in ourselves and in the world – both are necessary and part of God’s plan

I want to close with a little story that I hope will help cement this idea in your minds

A farmer used to tell his children that when they turned twelve he would share with them the secret of life

Well, the day came when his oldest son turned twelve and he came to his father and asked for the secret to be revealed

The farmer said he would now tell him but made him swear to not pass the information along to his younger siblings

Then he told him the secret to life is that the cow does not give milk – you either milk her or you don’t get milk

You have to rise early, trudge out to the barn, sit on the stool, place the bucket and do the work of milking to get milk

That really is by and large the secret of spiritual life as well

While God does indeed bless us beyond our efforts at times, he most often works in and through our efforts

We have to couple work with our faith knowing God is working in and through us and overcome opposition with prayer as we perform the work God has for us because we know it’s through many tribulations that we must enter the kingdom of God

Let’s pray