

CHAPTER 4

Resolving External Conflicts

“When everything seems to be going against you remember that the airplane takes off against the wind, not with it”

Henry Ford

Everything was going well with Nehemiah. The King had blessed his request and provided the supplies. The people had joyfully joined with him in the vision. Then Nehemiah’s leadership again came under fire as he experienced external challenges from his enemies. Here in the next few chapters we learn from Nehemiah how he managed the situation by trusting in God and empowering his people.

I. The Derision of Sanballat and Tobiah (1-5)

Verse 1-2 *When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews, 2 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?”*

Sanballat (sin has begotten), was a Samaritan leader who opposed the work of Nehemiah. He “became angry” which means “to be hot.” He was so angry and irritated by Nehemiah’s leadership and the progress of the work that he ridiculed the Jews in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria by asking five derisive questions to taunt the Jews and discourage them from their efforts.

1. What are these feeble (pathetic/frail/miserable/withered, and powerless) Jews doing? Rebuilding the wall.
2. Will they restore (complete) the wall? Yes (6:15)!

3. Will they offer sacrifices? Yes, indeed the Jews offered sacrifices (12:43).
4. Will they finish in a day? No, but they did finish the huge task within 52 days!
5. Can they bring stones back to life from those heaps of rubble? Yes, the Jews raised up the walls within 52 days. Fire had damaged the stones and thus had caused many of the stones to crack and crumble. But just like God does with our cracked and crumbled lives, they were able to repair and restore the stones and make them strong again.

Verse 3 *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!”*

Tobiah (Yahweh is good) was from an Ammonite background. He ridiculed the work of Nehemiah. He said that even a “fox” or “jackal” would be able to collapse it. In other words he was questioning the quality of the work.

Verse 4 *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.*

When opposition was raised against Nehemiah, he prioritized prayer, praying honestly before the Almighty God. Instead of personally acting against his enemies, he looked to God for vengeance. This shows the depth of Nehemiah’s devotion to God and the integrity of his vision and purpose. Nehemiah’s prayer borrows from the language of Jeremiah (Jer. 12:3; 17:18; 18:21-23).¹

Verse 5 *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.*

Nehemiah knew that vengeance belongs to God; thus he was asking God to intervene. As a compassionate leader, Nehemiah was heart-broken by the insults thrown against his faithful builders. Even though we often face this as a practical reality, Jesus taught us to forgive and pray for our enemies (Matt. 5:44). Unless the cross of Christ is experienced on a personal level, it is difficult to forgive unjust accusation and attacks. By our forgiveness and compassion, our foes can become friends of Christ.

II. The threat of attack (6-15)

Verse 6 *So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart.*

¹ Expositor’s commentary on Nehemiah P. 702

Opposition did not stop the work of God under the leadership of Nehemiah. With full hearts they finished rebuilding the wall. In other words, people were not halfhearted in their work, they fully joined with Nehemiah in accomplishing the vision.

Verse 7 *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.*

Now many enemies of the Jews (Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the people of Ashdod) became angrier as they heard about the progress of the restoration work on the walls. Ashdod means “fortress.” Upon Joshua’s conquest of the Promised Land, Ashdod was allotted to the Tribe of Judah (Joshua 15:46). In I Samuel 6:17 Ashdod is mentioned among the principal Philistine cities. Ashdodites opposed the work of Nehemiah.

Verses 8-9 *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.*

Here we see Nehemiah’s leadership under intense fire from these enemies. “Plotted together” comes from *qasar* which means “to tie up” or “to conspire.” These enemies conspired to come and fight against Jerusalem and create confusion. But Nehemiah, the man of God, prayed to God. He also used wisdom by posting a guard (v.9). The practice of Nehemiah, praying to God in every situation, provides a powerful example that each of us can emulate.

Verse 10 *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.”*

Next, Nehemiah’s leadership came under fire from a different source. Words of discouragement come from the people of God! They say there is far too much work, and we cannot rebuild the wall. “Laborers” means “burden bearer or porter” and occurs only here and in 1 Kings 5:15; 2 Chronicles 2:2, 18; 34:13.

“Is giving out” means “to stumble, to totter” and shows a worker tottering under the weight of his load, ready to fall at any step.

Verse 11 *Also our enemies 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.”*

Nehemiah must have had someone reporting to him about these plots. Enemies (adversary) would bring danger to Nehemiah and his workers.

The vigilance of Nehemiah and his fellow Jews prevented any attempt at violent attack. As children of God, we must be aware of our enemies' constant threats, but we should not be afraid of them. We must always put our hope in the power and care of our God.

Verse 12 *Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, "Wherever you turn, they will attack us."*

Nehemiah continued to face discouraging words from his own people, the Jews who lived near him. They told us "ten times" (idiomatic expression for "again and again"). "They are coming against us from all sides!" That is what they are really saying to Nehemiah.

As we plan to establish new ministries in the unreached villages of India and beyond, most of our immediate attacks and discouraging words will likely come from our own people, Christians around us. They will say, "It is a hard place, many have failed here. Go and find another place for your ministry." As the one who heard from the One who instructed you "to go" you must obey and single-mindedly focus on your calling. I can confidently share this from my own experience. Your God will be faithful to the calling He gave you. Our God will fight for us (cf. Exod. 14:14; Deut. 1.30; 3:22; 20:4; Josh. 10:14)!

Verse 13 *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.*

"At the exposed places" simply means "bare or open places". The NKJV translates it as "at the openings." It is derived from the word *sahah* which means "to be white," and occurs only here and in Ezekiel 24:7; 26:4,14.

Nehemiah placed the people by families with their swords (*hereb*, a term occurring 407 times in the O.T.), and spears and bows behind the lowest points of the wall.

Verse 14 *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."*

We need leaders who will stand up and inspire people when we face the fires and challenges in ministry and life. That was what Nehemiah did here. He stood up and told the builders not to be afraid, reminding them that the Lord is great, and He will fight for them as they carried out the will of God. The best way for us to dispel fear is to remember the promises of God (Deut. 3:22; 20:3; 31:6).

During the Second World War, Winston Churchill stood courageously and inspired his countrymen by saying, "...we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the hills, we shall never surrender..."². This is the hallmark of a rare visionary leader.

Verse 15 *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.*

God was the one fighting for the Israelites. "Enemies" is the plural of *oyeb* (cf. Ezra 8:22,31; Neh. 5:9; 6:1; 9:27-28). God can thwart the work of our enemies without an army. He is powerful enough to frustrate every enemy plan.

The enemies heard that the Israelites were aware of their plot and God had frustrated it; then the builders went back to their own work. Experience God in your life and ministry by trusting in the power and promises of God to enable you to persevere when you come under fire from your adversaries.

III. Rebuilding the Wall (16-23)

Verses 16-18 ¹⁶ *From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armor. The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah ¹⁷ who were building the wall. Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other, ¹⁸ and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked. But the man who sounded the trumpet stayed with me.*

Good strategy is essential for great success. Half the young men under Nehemiah's command did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears (a weapon with a long shaft used to thrust) and "shields" (armor breastplates of metal). They knew clearly that God was their security; thus the work continued.

The officers stood behind the people as they restored the walls. People were extremely alert for their security as they worked. With one hand they carried materials and with the other they held a weapon (a missile or a javelin).

Each of the builders wore his sword (worn in a sheath hung on a girdle; see 1 Sam 17:39; 18:4; 25:13; Ps 45:3) at his side as he worked to restore

2 <https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1940-the-finest-hour/we-shall-fight-on-the-beaches/>

the walls. The trumpet mentioned here is the *shofar*, used for signaling in times of attack. Josephus claimed that Nehemiah stationed trumpeters at intervals of five hundred feet.³

Verses 19-20 ¹⁹ *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.”* ²⁰ *Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!”*

Nehemiah continued to encourage his people that even though the work was great and extensive, and all were widely separated from each other along the wall, “Our God will fight for us.” He was demanding that everyone put full trust in God alone as they were fulfilling God’s mission. This is the concept of “Holy War” in which God fights for his people (cf. Josh. 10:14,42; Judges 4:14; 20:35; 2 Sam. 5:24).

Verse 21 *So we continued the work with half the men holding spears, from the first light of dawn till the stars came out.*

Generally, work stopped at sunset (Deut. 24:15; Matt. 20:1-12). Yet the people were so excited and united to complete the restoration that they started early and stayed late to the task. Half the men stood guard with spears while the rest continued the work.

Verse 22 *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.”*

As leader, Nehemiah gave clear instruction at every step of the construction. “Helper” here simply means “worker or servant.” The NKJV translates “servant.”

Why did Nehemiah ask everyone to sleep inside Jerusalem? I believe that, as a leader, he felt it essential to keep everyone focused on the task and to optimize time instead of coming from surrounding villages. If workers were sent back to their homes every evening, they could have been hindered from returning due to family pressures.

Verse 23 *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.*

This verse summarizes the extent to which all of them were single-minded in their task. Each one held his weapon, even when they went for water. They protected themselves from any impending enemy attack.

Whether awake or asleep, Nehemiah and his immediate entourage set an example of constant vigilance.⁴ With a weapon in hand and dressed at all times for action, they demonstrated their readiness to work or fight.

³ Ibid P.705.

⁴ Word Biblical commentary by HGM Williamson P.229

Conclusion and Application

In Chapter 4, as he came under external fire, Nehemiah responded to his enemies with a combination of prayer and readiness for battle. Good leaders maintain a balance of prayer and applying human wisdom for protection. Yes, God will fight for us. This is the covenant of God. Yet He asks us to be wise. It would be foolish in today's world to have a city without a police force or a nation without an army.

The apostle Paul reminds us that we are at war, and to expect opposition. He wrote in Ephesians 6:10-13:

¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. ¹¹ Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. ¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. ¹³ Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.

We prepare for spiritual battle by putting on the whole armor of God. We fight by praying (Ephesians 6:18-19). We know that the power of God is released in prayer. If you want to accomplish great things, you must be in prayer unceasingly. How is your prayer life? Are you praying on a regular basis for your family, your church, your cities, community leaders, unreached peoples, and those who are hurting around you?

Like Nehemiah, we will come under fire as we face different kinds of trials and oppositions. Remember God's promise that "He will fight for us." So, trust in God with prayer, and put on the whole armor of God. Expect great victory!



"Do not be afraid of them; the LORD your God himself will fight for you." Deuteronomy 3:22



Discussion Questions

1. What was the response to building the wall of Jerusalem? (4:1-3) What should we expect whenever we want to do the work of God? (Lk 4:14-30; Mk 5:1-17)
2. As the persecution continued, (4:7, 8) what did Nehemiah and the people continue to do? (4:9) What can we learn about faith and action? (Jas 2:22, 26; Eccl 11:6)
3. Identify the enemy within and the enemy without from verses 4:10, 11. How did Nehemiah deal with these two enemies? (4:13,14) How does Satan weaken us? (Heb. 2:15; Ro 8:15) How can we overcome fear? (4: 14b, Eph 6:12-17)
4. What is the fruit of prayer and faith? (4:15) What can you learn about prayer and strategy in verses 4:16-23? What was Jesus' strategy for world conquest with the Gospel? (Mk 3:14)
5. What can a leader do to help people overcome discouragement? Here are some tips adapted from Charles Swindoll's *Hand Me Another Brick*:
 - a. Unify people around a meaningful goal (Neh. 4:13-14).
 - b. Point people toward God (Neh. 4:14, Philippians 4:6).
 - c. Encourage people to get back into balance (Neh. 4:16-17).
 - d. Provide a rallying point for people. They need to know they are not alone (Neh. 4:20).
 - e. Occupy people in serving to increase morale and confidence (Neh. 4:21-23).