

GSM 7th October 2012

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. 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 labourers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall." 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." 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 people, 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 armour. 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.*

Pray

This morning, we are going to be looking at Nehemiah chapter 4. So far in this series, we've seen, in chapter 1 how Nehemiah found out about the ruin of Jerusalem. In chapter 2, he was allowed to return to Jerusalem to inspect the walls and in chapter 3 he assigned various people to repair different parts of the wall in chapter 3. So far, so good. But, this week, in **TOWIJ**, things start to heat up. Most of us have probably seen films or read books where the main character goes along swimmingly in whatever they're doing and then they suddenly hit an obstacle or two. In chapter 4, Nehemiah and the builders start to encounter opposition to the work they're doing. We'll see how there is opposition to God's work from outside and from within. Let's read the passage now and see what happens.

Read

Insulting Neighbours

So, who is this Sanballat? If you were here two weeks ago, you will have seen that he is mentioned in chapter 2 verse 10:

Nehemiah 2:10 - But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel.

What we know about Sanballat comes mainly from two men. One is Yitzhak Magen, who is the chief Israeli archaeologist for the West Bank. The other is a Roman-Jewish historian called Josephus, who lived in the first century AD. You may have heard of Josephus before in the context of non-Christian evidence for Jesus' existence. Joining these two sources, Sanballat was a leader and official within the Persian Empire, he was an Israelite descendent (but not a Jew) and was appointed governor over Samaria. He built a copy of the Jerusalem temple on the bottom of Mount Gerizim, which is in the modern-day West Bank, to try to unite the peoples of Samaria, and many Jews who had married Samaritans moved from Jerusalem to Samaria, leaving fewer Jews who remained in and around Jerusalem. What we know of Tobiah the Ammonite comes from the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, but he seems to be the Ammonite equivalent of Sanballat, and the two are both joining forces to try to prevent the rebuilding of Jerusalem.

So, once Sanballat, Tobiah and their mates hear of the rebuilding of Jerusalem, they start to mock and insult the Jews and undermine the rebuilding effort. They've ridiculed the idea of rebuilding the wall once before back in chapter 2:19-20. What's Nehemiah's response to the insults in chapter 4? He prays. He's done this before – in chapter 1, Nehemiah prays to God over Israel being returned from exile and that Nehemiah might be successful in what he undertakes. In chapter 2, Nehemiah prays when the king notices that he's unhappy. Here's what he prays now, in verses 4 and 5: *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.* Nehemiah prays for the protection of the work that he is overseeing. In this way, he is acknowledging that it is God's work that they are carrying out. Not only that, but that God will be the one to deal with any ridicule and threats to the work that is going on. This is the beginning of the opposition to the building work, and seems to be a bit of a tester from the opposition to see how committed Nehemiah and the returned exiles were to rebuilding the wall. So, when we are ridiculed for what we believe in, for carrying out God's work, we need to pray and give it to God and realise that he's in control. But, should we also pray for God to rain down wrath and retribution on those who oppose us? No. As we can see in Revelation, God will hand out his judgement on those who have rejected him. But, as Jesus taught Peter in Matthew 18:21-22, we should forgive those who have wronged us. And we should go one step further, in **Matthew 5:44** Jesus tells us: *But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.*

Therefore we need to pray for God's protection in situations where we are threatened, and at the same time, we need to love our potential ridiculers and opponents. Vengeance is the Lord's and it is his alone, as we are told in Romans 12 verse 19.

So, they carried on building the wall. Nehemiah starts verse 6 with the word 'so'. It's similar to the word 'therefore'. And what follows it, is the response to what's just gone on before. So, after praying and committing the protection of the work into God's hand, Nehemiah carries on. He might have been the first person to use the phrase 'keep calm and carry on'! But saying that, it's not just about keeping calm and carrying on. We do not live on our own strength alone, but we are able to carry on because of the strength that God gives us. God works most powerfully when we are weak.

And just like that, the wall is joined together all the way around Jerusalem to half its height. It's a bit like Blue Peter and here's one I made earlier. Now you don't see the wall, now you do! [Here's a](#) map of the old wall and the current wall that surrounds Jerusalem just so you have an idea of where the gates are that you heard about last week. Best estimates are from Josephus, the same Roman-Jewish historian as earlier, who gave the wall's dimensions as around 4.5 miles long and around 16ft tall. Therefore, at this point in chapter 4, at the end of verse 6, we can imagine the wall around Jerusalem being joined up and around 8ft high.

Open Opposition

Next comes the most testing time so far. In verses 7 to 12, we see open opposition from within and from without. Sanballat and Tobiah return to the action and start plotting to openly fight against the builders and to stir up trouble. The plotting can be seen in verses 7-8 and also in verse 11. In verse 12, Nehemiah is made aware of the planned attack by Jews living in areas surrounding Jerusalem. In verse 12, when the Jews say "*Wherever you turn, they will attack us*", a better translation would be "*You must return to us.*" The Jews living in areas surrounding Jerusalem were asking their men to return to their homes to protect them from the potential attacks coming from Sanballat and Tobiah. In verses 9 and 13-14, we see Nehemiah's response. Again, he prays. He also acts. I think this is a key point that we have to remember. We need to realise that God uses us as the tools with which he works his will, both his general will for the world and his specific will for our lives. Nehemiah takes some practical steps to protect the city. In verses 9 and 13, we see that he posts guards with their families to protect them and the weaknesses in the wall. In verses 13-23, Nehemiah takes other measures to defend the work. In verse 16, he organises his servants into shifts; half to work, half to hold the weapons. In verses 17-18, all the workers are armed and always had a hand free to use their weapons. Nehemiah also organises something like a fire drill, where everyone runs to the sound of a trumpet if they hear it. They are constantly on alert and in a state of readiness to repel any attacks – in verse 23, Nehemiah tells us that they even sleep with their clothes on! Something only students do these days! Let's follow Nehemiah's example and when we pray, pray that if it is possible for us to take action in a situation, then we will. And also then pray that God will give us both the ability and the opportunity to work out his will. Just an example of this: if you find yourself standing on train tracks (which is a bit of a silly thing to do), but if you do, and a train approaches, then you should pray that God will keep you safe. But you're not just going to keep standing there are you?! God's given you legs, so use them to get out of the way!

Hidden Opposition

In addition to this threat from the surrounding enemies, there is hidden opposition from within. In verse 10, we see that the workers are demoralised; saying that there is too much work to do, too much rubble to deal with and their strength is failing. Also, in verse 12, the Jews were, in effect, asking the builders to abandon Jerusalem. So, the builders wanted to give up the job they were carrying out. And by extension, their faith in God was waning. Are there times when we feel like giving in with a task or role that God has given us to do? We've all been given a role by God, whether that's a particular paid job, a skill, parenting or volunteering. Sometimes a project at work could seem too big to carry out. Sometimes raising kids can seem like too big of a challenge (that's what my mum kept telling me!) Sometimes things take forever to get worked out. I've been in situations like these in the past few years. In my final year, I started looking for jobs/further study in January. By the time exams came around, I hadn't got anything. By the time results came out, the same. I got married to Alyce in the August. A possible job came up in Harrogate, which was as certain as a job could be, until the funding for the project got pulled. At the end of September, still nothing. Living with my parents, newly married, walking down to the job centre to sign on. It was pretty demoralising and not the best way to start married life. There were times when I felt that my life had no particular direction. It would have been easy to give up looking for a job. So what did I hold onto? I held onto God's word, to the Bible. 1 Peter 1 is a

particular passage that God has strengthened me through. Nehemiah does the same here in verse 14 – he gives the workers a speech of encouragement. He reminds them of the Lord and his might.

Now, what we need to remember here is that the whole of the Old Testament points towards Jesus. So, when we study the Old Testament, we need to look for how it points us to Jesus, and we know that, like Nehemiah, Jesus faced trials too. It wasn't easy for him. He was tested from without by the Devil in the desert, and in Matthew 26, he faced opposition from within when he prayed in the garden of Gethsemane just before he was betrayed by Judas. *"My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."* So, our first response, again, should be to pray. The difference today compared to Biblical times is that we don't have a physical land or place to defend and protect. Our promised land is heaven, the new Jerusalem which John sees in the book of Revelation. So the most dangerous opposition we face today is spiritual opposition. That's not to say that we won't face physical opposition, but realistically, living in the UK, the likelihood of us being persecuted physically, for our faith, is very low. But if we do face physical opposition, as God's elect, we know that our salvation is secure and that cannot be taken away from us.

Opposing the Opposition

So how do we oppose spiritual opposition? It is very important to recognise that there is a battle going on, with trials, temptations and snares laid to distract us from carrying out God's will. In **Doctor Who**, there is an alien race called the Silence, who managed to take over the world. They were able to do this because as soon as you look away from them, you forget they were there. And that's why they were so effective at infiltrating; nobody remembered them. In a similar way, only this time it's real, it's really easy to forget that the Devil exists. When we are feeling down and discouraged, we need to remember that the Devil does exist. He is a real threat that we need to be prepared for. And I think the application of Nehemiah chapter 4 can be best summarised in **Ephesians 6:10-20**:

10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. 11 Put on the full armour 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 armour 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. 14 Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, 15 and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. 16 In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. 17 Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

18 And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people. 19 Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, 20 for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.

Explaining this is a whole sermon in itself! What it shows us is that we need to be prepared, to be strong and trusting in God's provision for us to withstand the arrows of the Devil. In the Ephesians passage, there are 10 imperative statements. Commands for us to follow. Not something to be taken light-heartedly, but to prioritise. The word 'stand' is repeated too. This is a stand we're taking against the schemes of the Devil. And we need to know in which direction to look to stand and face the Devil, so we need to be looking out for these schemes. Charles Baudelaire, a French poet in the mid-19th century said that the power of the Devil is to make us think that he doesn't exist. Some of you may have heard that in the film *The Usual Suspects*. The difficulty is that the schemes may take many different forms and it's hard to give examples of likely schemes. It could be illness, discouragement, being undermined, doubts, temptations, sinful anger, depression, forgetfulness to read God's word, among many more. If you ever

experience any of these things, then take a step back and work out if it is an attack from the Devil. As it says in Ephesians 4:27, don't give the Devil a foothold. And in doing that, you can then make a stand against him, you know where to look and you can stand firm. A useful book I've read that's helped me in understanding ways in which the Devil may work is the Screwtape Letters by C.S. Lewis. This is a fictional book of a demon in the Devil's office advising his nephew on ways of tempting a Christian away from his faith. So while it is not Biblically based, C.S. Lewis still provides examples of the Devil's schemes that we can be aware of.

So, we now know that it is a certainty that we will face opposition. This will be opposition from external sources, from those around us, but there will also be doubts and fears that come from within. We need to pray and put on the armour of God so that we can be prepared and so that we can stand firm when those attacks come. And as we saw in Nehemiah chapter 4, the schemes of Sanballat and Tobiah didn't have the effect they were hoping they would. Nehemiah reminded his workers of God's great power and might and they were strengthened to carry on the rebuilding. We also have the revelation of Jesus who has defeated the Devil once and for all. The Devil's schemes are the final desperate schemes of a defeated being, and if we stand firm, it is impossible for our salvation to be diminished. In fact, God will be all the more glorified. I'll finish with a couple of verses from James:

James 1:2-4 – Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.