

## ZEAL FOR THE LORD: NEHEMIAH 4:1-23

“...during the half-century that I have been a Christian [Nehemiah] has helped me enormously, more perhaps than any other Bible character apart from the Lord Jesus Christ...no one should wonder, therefore, that I now regard him as a particular friend.”  
- J.I. Packer, *A Passion for Faithfulness*, 29.

### I. Review

- A. Nehemiah goes on a night expedition to survey the damage to Jerusalem (Neh 2:11-16)

“Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen. <sup>10</sup> 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.” (Neh 2:9-10)

- B. Nehemiah stirringly calls the people to the task (“The God of heaven will make us prosper...”, Neh 2:20)  
C. The people of God rise up to do the work of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem (Neh 3).

“Then I said to them, ‘You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision.’ <sup>18</sup> And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, ‘Let us rise up and build.’ So they strengthened their hands for the good work.” (Neh 2:17-18)

### II. The Opposition: Nehemiah 4:1-14

Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews. <sup>2</sup> 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 burned ones at that?” <sup>3</sup> Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, “Yes, what they are building--if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall!” <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> So we built the wall. And all the wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work.

<sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it. <sup>9</sup> And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night. <sup>10</sup> In Judah it was said, “The strength of those who bear the burdens is failing. There is too much rubble. By ourselves we will not be able to rebuild the wall.” <sup>11</sup> And our enemies said, “They will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work.” <sup>12</sup> At that time the Jews who lived near them came from all directions and said to us ten times, “You must return to us.” <sup>13</sup> So in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, in open places, I stationed the people by their clans, with their swords, their spears, and their bows. <sup>14</sup> And I looked and arose and said to the nobles and to the officials and to 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 homes.” (Neh 4:1-14)

1. What tactic does Sanballat employ to oppose the rebuilding work? Do you think this accurately reflected his inward concern?

“...they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, <sup>22</sup> strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that **through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.**” (Acts 14:22)

2. What was Nehemiah’s immediate response to the opposition? Was such a strong reaction justified? Do you think it is ever justified today?
3. What form of vengeance is Nehemiah calling for (vv. 4-5)—his own? How is this a crucial element when engaging in imprecation (‘curse calling’)? Can you think of other safeguards?
4. Explain how is it legitimate (even necessary!) for Christians to want, at some level, God’s vengeance to be taken on His enemies?

*“[R]ighteous retribution is one of the glories of the divine character. If it is right that God should desire to exercise it, then it cannot be wrong for his people to desire him to exercise it.”* —R.L. Dabney, *Discussions by Robert L. Dabney*

*“God’s kingdom cannot come without Satan’s kingdom being destroyed... Evil cannot be destroyed without the destruction of men who are permanently identified with it.”* —Johannes G. Vos, *“The Ethical Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms”*

5. Describe the opportunity for discouragement in vv. 10-12. How were the people feeling at this point? What are some of the primary discouragements you face as a believer today?
6. What was their response in vv. 9, 13-14? What does this teach us about how we are to respond? What are the twin errors regarding prayer and action? To which are you most prone?

### III. The Response: Nehemiah 4:15-23

*When our enemies heard that it was known to us and that God had frustrated their plan, we all returned to the wall, each to his work.<sup>16</sup> From that day on, half of my servants worked on construction, and half held the spears, shields, bows, and coats of mail. And the leaders stood behind the whole house of Judah,<sup>17</sup> who were building on the wall. Those who carried burdens were loaded in such a way that each labored on the work with one hand and held his weapon with the other.<sup>18</sup> And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built. The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me.<sup>19</sup> And I said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, “The work is great and widely spread, and we are separated on the wall, far from one another.<sup>20</sup> In the place where you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us.”*

*<sup>21</sup> So we labored at the work, and half of them held the spears from the break of dawn until the stars came out.<sup>22</sup> I also said to the people at that time, “Let every man and his servant pass the night within Jerusalem, that they may be a guard for us by night and may labor by day.”<sup>23</sup> So neither I nor my brothers nor my servants nor the men of the guard who followed me, none of us took off our clothes; each kept his weapon at his right hand.*

1. Where in your life is the need for prayer and action? The need for a sense of biblical duty, work, and faith?

**“Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.” (1 Pet 5:8)**

**“Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” (Mat 26:41)**