

Bringing Stones to Life Again

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[0 : 00] Amen. Do have the Bible open at Nehemiah chapter 4 as we look at that together.!

For the Lord that I know and love so well. I think I tend to expect people to be as enthusiastic and caught up by God's amazing love and his perfect justice as I am.

And then I kind of get disappointed when that doesn't happen. Because it doesn't always, does it? Disappointed when people aren't more on board or open.

Probably more than I should, if I'm honest. Happened recently to me. I was talking to somebody about the Lord Jesus. And they just couldn't or wouldn't separate what some Christians in the US are doing and saying and how they're voting.

Couldn't separate that from the church of Jesus. Jesus himself. And so it was a closed door. And you kind of feel like crawling into a corner, don't you?

[1 : 23] You think, oh, what did I do that for? Maybe it's something else for you. Maybe it's, you know, the latest scandal that we read about in the papers that have happened in a church. Or maybe it's an insensitive remark by the pastor in the middle of the sermon when you brought your friend to church.

That might be a thing, mightn't it? And so we feel like that didn't go well. And maybe our faith isn't that strong. And did you ever get that? Part of the problem is real failings and faults, isn't it?

We have to hold up our hands to that. But part of it, I think, is maybe a slightly wrong expectation on our part of what will happen when we share Jesus with other people.

How they will react. And our passage today adjusts that a bit. We've been thinking, if you've been following along in this series, about God's kingdom. And having a real passion for God's people and God's place.

And we've been following Nehemiah, who's got that passion as he rebuilds the walls of Jerusalem. Which are a picture of the church, of course. So that peace and rest can again be offered to anybody who's willing to come inside those walls.

[2 : 32] And we've seen Nehemiah's passion and his prayerfulness, especially in chapter 1. And God has blessed that. And we've seen opposition, haven't we? Right from the beginning of the first adventure.

And we see that Nehemiah as a leader is much like Jesus. We saw that too last time, didn't we? So for those of us who are following Jesus, it's good to look at Nehemiah and think, how can I learn from this man?

And last week we were thinking with Andy about each of us having a place on the wall, doing our bit as God calls us to, whatever our shape and our skills are.

And now we come to chapter 4 and what we see in chapter 4 is growing opposition. There are enemies. And we see that in three rounds. If you were following as we read through that passage, three lots of opposition, three responses.

And underneath that story, not always easy to see, but there, like a golden thread, is God's plan to rebuild his people, to rebuild his place by bringing stones back to life again.

[3 : 40] And he invites us to join with him in that rebuilding work. So, let's get straight into the story. First, we need to have our expectations of how people will react when we share God's word, adjusted by God's word.

And we need to expect open ridicule and secret plots. Look at verse 1 with me. When Sambalat 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 in 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 are they building? Even a fox climbing up on it would break down their wall of stones.

So far from being excited to see God at work in their neighborhood, the people around ridicule God's people. And it's not a discussion. Did you notice that? It's not that Sambalat and his cronies came and chatted to Nehemiah about what they saw.

[4 : 47] No. They're just laughing at Nehemiah from the safety of the echo chamber. That's really hard, isn't it? When it's like that. And as it often is today. Because there's no discussion to be had.

We just have darts flung at us. Sometimes with no opportunity to respond, even. Here's what they're saying. What place do these people think they will have in this world if they do this stuff? What place do you think you will have in this world if you join these Christians? What do you think will happen to your chances of getting the best ride if you join that bunch of no-hopers?

Do you think you're going to pray all your problems away? That's the tone of what they're saying. And it will come from the lips of the most powerful people around. Because that's who Sambalat and his cronies were. And that really hurts, doesn't it?

Because sometimes it does feel like one good stamp and the walls of our faith will come crumbling down. Open ridicule. But there's also secret plots.

[5 : 54] Look at verse 7. When Sambalat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the people of Ashdod heard that the repairs of 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. The list has got longer. Did you notice that? From the first round of opposition and the beginning of chapters 1 and 2.

When the Ashdodites join in, there's now opposition from the north, the south, the west and the east. They're completely surrounded. Now that's not because God wants us to see conspiracies everywhere.

But because God wants us to expect that people with power and influence in all kinds of places will oppose his work, will oppose the church.

And not just, sadly, because they are misguided or have misunderstood, but also because they have understood God's revealed will for this world and for his people and they have rejected it.

[7 : 00] Because Sambalat and his cronies knew that the king had authorized the rebuilding of Jerusalem and they still opposed it. What happens to God's people in those circumstances? 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. Verse 12. And then the Jews who lived near them, that's Sambalat, came and told us ten times over, wherever you turn, they will attack us.

Fear and exhaustion. That's what happens when we get this kind of opposition, isn't it? Because we're humans. This is real life. We get worn out by the size of the task and the fear of what the consequences will be if the enemy gets their way.

Why keep going to that place? That's what the deceiver whispers in our ear, isn't it? Is it really achieving anything? Going week by week. Is it really worth it? Still looks like a mess to me.

Sooner or later, it'll cause you trouble. Isn't it easier to just quietly down tools, slip away, back to the way it was before?

[8 : 09] Have you ever felt that? I have. It does feel hard. It feels too hard sometimes, doesn't it? Nehemiah doesn't condemn them for feeling that way.

But there is an answer later. What we need to take from this, I think, take to heart, is that we should expect opposition. Our expectation should be not only that hearts soften as God's Spirit works in them, but also that some hearts will harden.

Because not everybody wants to submit to Jesus and his loving ways. And when that happens, are we ready? Are we ready for ridicule? Are we ready for people to plan to oppose us?

Are you on the lookout? Are you looking around the church, looking for signs of fear and exhaustion like there was here, so that we can help each other? How do we respond when that kind of mocking comes, when you cringe away inwardly?

Are you tempted to just throw a few one-liners back? Give as good as you get. I usually think of some really good lines about two hours after the discussion's over.

[9 : 25] But it wouldn't be any good anyway, would it? What does Nehemiah do? He prays. Verse 4. Hear us, our God, for we are despised.

Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in the 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.

It's always very clear what's going on there. But I think his prayer is basically this. Lord, these men have insulted you in front of those who are working for you.

So your glory is at stake. Don't forget that, Lord. Make sure they reap what they sow. But then Nehemiah leaves it up to the Lord as to how to answer that prayer.

And we never find out what their fate is, actually. Because that's not the point here. The point is we are to turn to God, the most powerful ally in the world, in prayer.

[10 : 25] And leave the outcome to him. Verse 9. In the face of the second threat, the secret plotting, what do they do?

We prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat. So, interestingly, when the enemies escalate, they go from ridicule to plotting, don't they?

What does Nehemiah do? He escalates too, but he escalates in prayer. He gets together with everybody to pray. The more opposition, the more prayer.

Because our primary weapon is not words back to the enemies. Our primary weapon is words to the Lord. Stay true to the mission and pray.

But that's not all Nehemiah does, is it? Verse 9. He posts a guard. It doesn't just carry on the same old way as before. He reacts appropriately.

[11 : 24] He uses his brain and he thinks, what am I going to do? He posts a guard. He takes steps to plan, prepare, organize. He puts people in strategic places. He dedicates some of them to guard duty.

He divides them into teams. He sets a night watch. One of the commentators summarizes this really helpfully. He says, they avoid the sin of panic because they pray.

But they also avoid the sin of paralysis because they plan and prepare and post a guard. So it's not let go and let God. And also, it's not a kind of a, well, God might be up there, but he's not doing anything, so I'll have to do it all.

That's humanism. That's not faith. And this is what the pattern of partnership between heaven and earth looks like in our lives. Pray, post a guard.

Trust God. Keep your powder dry, as Oliver Cromwell put it. Faith and good stewardship together. Whether that's in outreach or whether it's just creatively glorifying God in the things you do every day.

[12 : 32] This is how it should be. Talk a lot about being in tune with the world, kind of in harmony with nature. You get a lot of that, don't we? Nature has a creator, of course.

This is what it looks like to really be in tune with reality, the creator's reality. It is to pray and post a guard. Loving God and putting our backs and our brains into it.

Love you to take a moment just to reflect and ask yourself, is that the pattern of your life with God? Or to put it slightly differently, am I more inclined towards prayer without action?

Or action without prayer? Just take a moment just to think about that, reflect on that. And then I'd encourage you to pray that the Lord would change you as you need to be changed. And I'd encourage you to plan what you're going to do about that.

Shall we take a moment to just do that? Seems like it works.

[13 : 50] Let's look at verse 6. So we rebuilt the wall. Till all of it reached half its height. For the people worked with all their heart.

So after Nehemiah prays, they just get back to it, don't they? And they work with all their hearts.

They go back to their calling. Verse 15, same again. 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. Because they have a mind to the work. They're absolutely willing. Even under threat. Even despite discouragement and fear. What joy that must have been to Nehemiah.

To have that reaction after prayer. What a joy to the Lord. To have a people like that. But they're not just willing to work. But they're also ready to fight now.

Let's look at verses 13 and 14. Therefore I, that's Nehemiah, 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.

[14:53] 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, your daughters, your wives and your homes.

Verse 17 and 18, it's the same. Look, those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other. And each of the builders wore a sword at his side as he worked.

They have their trowels. And they have their swords. Each of them. And that too is the normal Christian life. Friends, it is a fight.

As well as a build. It is a fight. But we fight with the sword that makes the wounded whole. That's what the song says, isn't it? It's the sword of the spirit and the word.

And we fight to defend. Just like Nehemiah does here. Not to attack or to conquer. There's no justification for crusades here. And our fight is what the Bible calls a struggle against principalities and powers.

[15:57] It is a spiritual fight. Although, of course, it involves real flesh and blood people. It's a struggle against sin. And we fight that fight first with prayer.

And only then with words. And yes, just very occasionally, it will mean taking up physical arms to defend freedom.

To defend rest within the walls. The message of the gospel. It's what we're thanking God for this week, isn't it? The VE80.

People who are willing to take up arms to defend freedom. So we need to be willing to work and ready to fight. And amazingly, there's a plan for exactly how that's supposed to work.

Verse 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. Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there.

[16:58] Our God will fight for us. So where the trumpet sounds, that's where everybody is to come. To gather. To assemble. Ready to fight.

If you know your history, you'll know that in World War II, church bells did double duty. Didn't they? They rang to call people to worship. And they rang to warn of the invasion as well.

That's this. See? That's now. Every Sunday morning, the trumpet sounds. calling us to gather on the front line here.

Calling us to labour for the Lord, to do battle with sin. So every Sunday morning, there is the question, when the trumpet sounds, will you come? Nehemiah's really echoing Jesus, isn't he? Jesus says, watch and pray. Watch and pray. He's echoing 1 Peter 5. Be ready and waiting. For your enemy, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for somebody to devour.

[18:06] He's really saying, be like the five wise girls in the story that Jesus told. They had enough oil, and they stayed awake, so that when the bridegroom came, they were ready.

So we have that willingness to work. Are we prepared to fight? If it comes to it. How do we do that? Where does the power come from?

It can't just be a battle cry, can it? And then in our own strength, there must be more. So let's go back one more time to this passage, and look for the power for that pattern. Sambalat's mocking question, verse 2.

Can they bring stones back to life from those heaps of rubble, burned as they are? Or can they? No. No. The Israelites know it.

They can't bring stones back to life. And they felt it. What's Nehemiah's response? Verses 14, 15. Don't be afraid of them.

[19:08] Remember the Lord. When our enemies heard that we were aware of their plot and that God had frustrated it, we return to the war.

And verse 20, our God will fight for us. Remember the Lord. I've asked a few people just to read out a Bible verse or two to help us remember the Lord and what he does as we think about him bringing stones back to life again.

So first of all, Ezekiel 36, verse 26. Who's reading Ezekiel? Thanks, Emma. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you.

I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. Fantastic. Matthew 3, verse 9. And do not think you can say to yourselves, we have Abraham as our father.

I tell you that out of these stones, God can raise up children from Abraham. Thanks, Emma and Asha. Phil, 1 Peter 4. Verse 4.

[20 : 23] 4 and 5, thanks. As she come to him, the living stone, rejected by humans, but chosen by God and precious to him. You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

Great, fantastic. I will give you a new heart to replace your heart of stone. God can raise up from the very stones children for himself and from 1 Peter chapter 2 because he is the living cornerstone and because he is building us as living stones into a temple.

That's how we can do this because God is capable of bringing stones to life again. Maybe you're a believer here this morning and you feel like your heart is just calcifying under layers and layers of difficulty and distraction.

Or your heart is petrifying slowly under waves and waves of fear of what it means to be a Christian, what it means to follow him, where it could lead you. God is in the business of bringing stones back to life again.

Maybe you feel you are as hard as a stone and there is just no way you will ever come to trust in the Lord Jesus. God is in the business of bringing stones back to life again.

[21 : 50] Or maybe you know someone and they're just foremost in your mind and you think they're like a lump of rock. Even Moses hitting them with his staff isn't going to produce any life. Not that one. God is in the business of bringing stones to life again.

That is what he does because God's real building project of course is not the stones and mortar of the walls of Jerusalem but the hearts of his people.

He builds them as they build for him. And so we can stand with Nehemiah and we can say our God will fight for us.

And we know that because of the cross. Because that's where Jesus utterly frustrated the plans of his enemies. That is where he fought for us until his last breath.

Crushing death. Satan. And not just the enemy outside the walls but the enemy within as well. And so we can work willingly knowing that Jesus has said to us already it is finished.

[23 : 02] We can fight in the power that he supplies knowing that he defeated death on the cross. Knowing that that peace and rest within the walls is already guaranteed. it's safeguarded.

Because God is in the business of bringing stones to life again. He invites us to be a part of that. I invite you to join with me in praying now and committing to doing that.

Lord God we thank you so much that you can take mocking words from enemies and turn them into beautiful truth.

We thank you that in the light of Jesus Christ in the light of what we know from the New Testament we know that you do bring dead stones back to life. So will you fill us with your power we pray.

Help us to be prepared to face opposition. Help us to pray post a guard. Help us to be willing to work Lord and ready to fight when the time comes.

[24 : 04] In Jesus name Amen.