

Personal and Political Attacks vs Prayer and the Hand of God

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 June 2025

Preacher: John Ross

[0 : 00] Well, good morning, fellow Muppets. It's nice to see you. Would you agree that jaw jaw is! always better than war war? Well, that's what we're told or what Churchill said in the war, at the end of the war. But jaw jaw can be exhausting, exhausting. Some people just insist on talking and talking and talking. They insist on their own way. They continue arguing. And you can not get a word in edgeways. In this world, said Jesus, you will have troubles. And it's true, isn't it? There's always trouble somewhere in the world. In Nehemiah's day, there was trouble on every hand. As we've been reading through the book, chapter 4, there was opposition from outside, from Sanballat, Tobiah, and the people of Ashdod. Chapter 5, had trouble from within. And now we encounter Sanballat, Tobiah, and a man called Geshem again. Troubles, troubles, and more troubles.

Presumably, if you can't get away with blatant outside attacks, you have to try a more subtle way. Schmoozing, some people call it. Maneuvering, plotting. Scheming is Nehemiah's word. Look at verse 2. When word came to Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem, the Arab, and the rest of our enemies, that I had built the wall and not a gap was left in it, though up to that time I had not set the doors in the gates. Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message. Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono. But they were scheming to harm me. Scheming. And this chapter contains some of Satan's schemes, or what is called in the King James Version, the wiles of the devil.

Subtle ploys and tricks that the evil one uses to knock us off course, and what J.I. Packer calls spiritual seduction. Let's look at some of these schemes as we go through the wall building. First of all, there's the scheme of intrigue. It's here in verse 2. Let's be reasonable. Come on, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plains of, I suppose he pronounced it Ono, didn't he? The wall is pretty well finished. Just the doors to hang. These doors are huge. They're not just a door and a wall. They're often a courtyard between two walls. Often the elders met in this area. It was often used as a magistrate's court as well. This isn't just a quiet note saying, let's have a consultation. No, no. It's a sort of note that says, we've had our differences in the past, Nehemiah. We're not very far apart from each other, are we? Why don't we meet and discuss things in a reasonable manner? After all, we're grown men, aren't we? A mini summit on the plains of Ono would be ideal. Ono, by the way, is 27 miles away, halfway to Samaria. But Nehemiah can clearly see through their scheme, can't he? But they were scheming to harm me, he says. The plan smelt of treachery, says one writer. Maybe Nehemiah would be ambushed. Maybe even an accident would happen as he went there. They clearly knew that if he was taken out, the project would stop. Nehemiah, however, is single-minded. Nehemiah is quite clear. He doesn't want the door left open so invaders can come in. He sends some messengers along to tell them that the work is important. [3 : 54] So I sent messages, verse 3, with this reply. I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you? Single-minded. He's got his eye on the ball. He knows that he must keep the main thing the main thing. And that's what he believes in. This wall building is the main thing that he's called to do. Your good health. But isn't that true for all gospel causes? The devil is longing to hold us up, to take us off on a tangent somewhere, to lose our focus. It's easy to be distracted. Many, many solid gospel projects have gone sour because of compromise or losing that single-mindedness that we had at the beginning. So this little chat with these chaps will have to wait. But they're really insistent, aren't they? Look at those four.

Four times they sent me the same message. Four times. And each time I gave them the same answer. But the fifth time they up the ante. I've called this innuendo. Have you heard? It is reported,

they say, in verse 6. What they do is they send a letter. Sanbelet sent his assistant with me with the same message. In his hand was an unsealed letter. And this is what was written inside it. It is reported among the nations, and Geshem says it's true. So it must be, mustn't it? Whoever Geshem is, that you and the Jews are plotting to revolt. And therefore you're building the wall. Moreover, according to these reports, you're about to become their king. And have even appointed prophets to make this proclamation about you in Jerusalem. There is a king in Judah. Now this report will get back to the king. So come, let us meet together. An open letter. A letter so that we know its contents. A letter accusing him of plotting a revolt, of planning to become king. These are rumours. Now I love that phrase, and Geshem says it's true. So it must be, mustn't it? Pastor, there are loads of people in this church who think we should slow down and talk a bit about this. Even Geoffrey over there, he agrees with us. Rumours are really, really dangerous ploys, particularly in churches.

They spread like wildfire. They cause huge damage. And there is only one thing to do if it's untrue. Deny the accusation outright, clearly. That's what Nehemiah does in verse 8. See that?

[6 : 52] I sent him this reply. Nothing like what you're saying is happening. You're just making it up out of your head. Indeed, he goes further than that. He accuses Sanballat not only of making it up, but he turns the whole thing to prayer. And that's what he is so good at. He asks God to strengthen his hands. See, he adds in 9, they were all trying to frighten us, thinking their hands will get too weak for the work and it will not be completed. But I prayed. Now strengthen my hands. Help me going with this project, Lord. Help me to ignore the gossip. Help me to continue to manage it, to oversee it, to complete it. He seems shrewd enough to realise that the goal of rumour-mongering is to demoralise him with the fear of what the king might think. I'll taxerxes if the project stalled.

Let's say it again. Brothers and sisters, we must avoid rumour-mongering. Let's avoid gossip and whispering. Let's keep our minds fixed on getting the gospel out to our contemporaries.

That's our task. That's why we're here. That's what church is for. It's not our reputation that is at stake. It's Jesus Christ's reputation at stake. And we need extra energy to keep going, to make his name known. So we pray. The gospel project is in the hands of God. But the opposition isn't yet over, is it? Come down to verse 10. After he's prayed, here now is intimidation. Why don't we meet secretly, is the request at verse 10. One day I went to the house of Shemaiah, the son and son of that, who was shut in his home. And he said, let's meet in the house of God, inside the temple. Let's close the temple doors because men are coming to kill you. By night they're coming to kill you.

This is the third ruse. Intimidation. Let's meet secretly. Let's lure Nehemiah through fear.

The fear they're coming to get us. They're coming to get you. Let's meet in the temple. It's safe there. It's pious there. And we can close the doors. It sounded so good in verse 10, didn't it?

[9 : 18] But Nehemiah, verse 11, there's a but, sees right through the scheme. See that? But I said, should a man like me run away? Or should someone like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go. I realized that God had not sent him, but that he had prophesied against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. He had been hired to intimidate me so that I would commit a sin by doing this. And then they would give me a bad name to discredit me.

Once again, he does what he always does. He prays. He prays. He realized that this is a setup. He realizes that this man, Shammai, has been hired to give him a bad name. And he wants God to know how the opposition have tried to intimidate him.

So he says in 14, remember Tobiah and Sanballat, my God, because of what they have done. Remember also the prophet Noadon, how she and the rest of the prophets have been trying to intimidate me.

Look at 52. It's the most brilliant verse here, isn't it? So the wall was completed on the 25th of Elul in 52 days. I want the book to end here. I want the chapter to finish. The wall's built. It's done.

Brilliant. Isn't it brilliant? But now you see the fear factors on the other foot because the opposition are now afraid and they've lost their self-confidence in verse 16. And you want to shout as I do, hooray!

[11 : 07] But sadly, this isn't the end of the troubles. There is one small section to come. They just insist on meeting with Nehemiah.

When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid. They were afraid. And they lost their self-confidence because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God. Also, in those days, the nobles of Judah were sending many letters to Tobiah and replies from Tobiah kept coming to them.

For many in Judah were under oath to him. And since he was son-in-law to this chap and his son was that fellow, he had married into the opposition, is what they're saying.

Moreover, they kept reporting to me his good deeds and then telling me what I said. And Tobiah sent letters to intimidate me.

More letters flying around. Intimidation. Discrediting his motives. Many letters, it says. Tobiah seems a nasty piece of work, doesn't he?

[12:18] Many were under oath to him, we read. As well as his marriage alliances, he continued to bombard Nehemiah with his missives. You know, one well-known tactic is to wear people down.

Maybe by consistent niggling. Niggling. Or swamping them with emails and texts. And some leaders can't take it and they crumble.

You know, I'm an old muppet. But some of you are younger than I am. Most of you, many of you, the majority of you, all of you are younger than I am.

If you're in the under 30s, do you know that the majority of you are reluctant to take up the mantle and become leaders? We are finding it much, much harder to recruit under 30s who want to come into Christian ministry to become pastors and Christian leaders.

And we are told that you don't want all the hassle of being attacked by grumblers. You've seen too many pastors face troubles.

[13:36] You don't want it. You've seen too many missionaries get mocked and pushed aside and have to come home. You don't want it. Do you know that's true in business as well in our contemporary Gen Z world?

Once you have a job, you aim to keep it. You keep your head down. There's no need to strive to climb the ladder. Who wants to be chopped down if you put your head up?

A word to younger brothers and sisters. We must step up to the plate. Jesus calls us to be ambitious and to serve him. Nehemiah was not prepared to be worn down.

But Nehemiah is a picture of our Lord Jesus, isn't he? And Jesus too faced opposition and he won. Yes, Nehemiah kept going, didn't he?

He kept going. And like our Lord Jesus, he too faced opposition. From very early in his ministry, the Lord Jesus did. Even in his home synagogue in Nazareth, Luke tells us, that as he applied the scriptures, the people were furious with Jesus and drove him out of town.

[14:45] He's a youngster. Just starting his ministry. On another occasion, healing a man on the Sabbath in the synagogue, the Pharisees and Herodians, groups that were normally opposed to each other, plotted how they might kill him.

You see, all through the Gospels, if Nehemiah faced tougher position, our Lord Jesus faced it all the more. Matthew says that the Jewish leaders schemed secretly to kill Jesus.

Yes, our Lord Jesus knows all about plotting and all about scheming. There was constant pressure to keep quiet, to keep his head down, to avoid conflict. And all the time there were those who opposed him using all sorts of intimidation tactics.

And by the time he got to the cross, it was lies, mockery and public shaming. Our Lord Jesus, just like Nehemiah here, took it all.

He held his nerve. He answered clearly, sensibly. He constantly prayed to his father. And in the end, he overcame. But not as you might think.

[15:54] He was crushed and died before he rose again. Apparently in history, some Christian groups have called themselves overcomers.

They have found that God has helped them overcome certain sins or certain addictions or certain troubles. And just as Jesus overcame the world, so these groups too have believed in history that they can overcome.

Remember Joan Baez's song, We Shall Overcome? It was in that sort of period of history that some of these things rose up. We could overcome. I personally would be a little cautious about overcomers.

Because there are people who seem to be able to control their sins and their addictions. Most of us do. But only Jesus completely overcomes them. Because only Jesus upended death.

And therefore we can face troubles because Jesus has gone before us. You see, it's only in Jesus, in him, that we are eternally secure.

[16:57] In this world, you will have trouble, said Jesus. And especially leaders on the front line will always have trouble. But we do have the Lord Jesus with us. And he is with us by his spirit.

And we are not alone. And nor was Nehemiah. He knew his calling. He knew the task that God had given him. And he kept pressing on. He didn't give in to intimidation or the opposition.

Here's a lesson I suggest we take home with us this morning. We too face opposition. All the time. If you're a Christian, you're in the club. Face opposition with us.

You're a Muppet. We need spiritual discernment. Yes. We need the ability to separate out the genuine from the false.

Just like Nehemiah. He knew what he was called to do. And he got on with it. How do you know if something is true or something is false? In the days of yore, there were bank cashiers who counted money in the bank.

[18:04] You won't see them today. You won't see a bank today. A bank cashier was once asked how she would recognise counterfeit bank notes. Well, she said, we're trained to look for them.

What do you look out for? In our training, she said, we spend hours and hours counting genuine money. So we know the genuine.

We know it so well that we can tell when we come across a fake. It's very clever, that, isn't it? You spend your time with the genuine.

With the Lord Jesus. With God's people. With his word. In prayer. So that you can tell the false and the fake. You see, Satan's strategy, surely, is to discredit God's people.

And particularly to take out God's leaders. And the leader's response is to have a clear, godly goal. And to keep to it. To keep the main thing, the main thing.

[19:09] Leaders must have a spiritual nose. I've got a Jewish nose, but you need a spiritual nose. And we're not to fall into the devil's trap. We must be so captured by the true gospel.

That we can smell out the false. And in Nehemiah's case, and in our case, we must constantly pray. Now strengthen my hands, oh Lord.

Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you for Nehemiah's persistence. Just as we thank you for the apostles who kept going despite opposition.

But we are especially grateful to our Lord and rescuer, Jesus the Christ. He's blessed, who persevered all the way to the cross. Yes, he despised the shame.

And is now seated at your right hand in glory. He prays for us. No doubt praying that we too will press on to the very end. Please help us to have a very clear focus of what you've called us to.

[20:12] And not be distracted by lesser objectives. This world is a real mess. And everyone needs to know about Christ and his good news. Thank you for being an eternal God.

For reversing our destiny. So that we might have a glorious eternity ahead of us. We pray together.

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. The pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

Amen. Amen.