

Nehemiah 4:1-23

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[0 : 00] in the book of Nehemiah, chapter 4, and I'm going to read the whole chapter. It can be found in the White Bibles on page 440. Again, the scripture text is Nehemiah, chapter 4, on page 440 of the White Bibles.

Please stand for the reading of God's Word. Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews, 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? 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.

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. 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. So we built the wall, and all the wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work. 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.

[1 : 42] And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem, and to cause confusion in it. And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night.

In Judah it was said, The strength of those who bear the burdens is falling. There is too much rubble. By ourselves we will not be able to rebuild the wall. And our enemies said, They will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work.

At that time the Jews who lived near them came from all directions and said to us ten times, You must return to us. 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.

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.

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. From that day on, half of my servants worked on construction, And half held the spears, shields, bows, and coats of mail.

[2 : 58] And the leaders stood behind the whole house of Judah 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.

And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side where he built. The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me, 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.

In the place you hear the sound of the trumpet, Rally to us there, our God will fight for us. So we labored at the work, And half of them held spears from the break of dawn until the stars came out. 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. 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.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Thank you. How do great things for God get done?

[4 : 28] And from Nehemiah chapter 4, What can we learn for the work that we have recently begun? Evidently, great things for God get done, But not without opposition.

Take a look at verses 1 to 9. It is once the work got underway, That it was bad mouthed by appointed officials, Who had long held political sway.

Now, when Sam Ballett heard that we were building the wall, He was angry and enraged and jeered in the presence of God's people.

You see, we had met Sam Ballett and Tobiah earlier, And they had heard of the plan to get underway, And all had been quiet.

But when the work got underway, Then the opposition came out. The five questions that Sam Ballett places there in verses 2 and 3 Are amazing for the way in which they not only despise the work, But are meant to discourage the worker.

[5 : 51] Look what he says. What are these feeble Jews doing? In other words, This is a failed enterprise. The irony of weakness.

Will they restore it for themselves? In other words, Do they really think they'll be capable of finishing this? Will they sacrifice?

In other words, Will they actually reconstitute a place in which God's people enter and offer worship? Will it be again a city of worshipers of their God?

Will they finish up in a day? Do they really think the timeline is possible? Will they revive the stones out of heaps of rubbish and burnt ones at that?

I mean, The construction site itself was carried forward with used lumber in some respects.

Certainly concrete.

[6 : 59] The utilization of stones that had long ago broken loose from a foundation. The words are loaded with malice.

Their intent to injure. There's a sense of derision. Opposition to the work appeared then through the weaponization of words.

Words from outsiders. Meant to deride. Now that's good for us to know.

Good to remember that until the work begins, opposition normally lays quiet. But when work gets underway, when the church rouses herself to a reconstitution of her own person, for indeed that is what we are doing over the next year and nine months, that he is to gather in action, re-covenanting ourselves individuals and corporately as a construction site for God.

That he is to remake us and refashion us and re-commit our minds to holiness and godliness and grace.

[8 : 18] that the old ways of living which have broken down the walls of our conscience and the purity of our lives would be put away and a new man, a new woman, a new church would emerge of spiritual vitality.

And when a Christian or when a church commits herself to godly growth in grace and a putting away of the old ways, when they begin, then the weaponization of words come out.

Do you really think you'll turn over a new leaf this time? Didn't you once walk with God and yet you've fallen so often? Do you really think you'll reconstitute your life in ways that are pleasing?

This isn't anything new. I think of the Philistine, Goliath, in 1 Samuel 17, verse 22, when he sees the irony of weakness before him.

David, this young boy with a sling and some stones, attempting to dethrone the supreme military in the world at that time.

[9 : 45] And he actually derides him with, do you actually bring this before me? God's anointed savior king was derided through words meant to distract and demoralize.

It's the same thing that happens in Luke chapter 22, when my savior is before Pilate and the soldiers, and they see him in all of his inability, in all of his quietude, in all of his persistent work at establishing something great for God.

And it says that they mocked him. And then they beat him. And then they continued, it says, to say many things about him.

Words to our Lord concerning his conviction to do something great for God. And when he stood at that very moment, somebody was there to deride him.

Would we expect anything less? Try to think about covenanting to walk purely in the coming year.

[11 : 15] What will your friends say? What might your family say? Try to be a member of a church that not only thinks about reconstituting who we are as a people before God, but restoring a place

into which generations can come and know God.

Certainly, when the work gets underway, opposition will emerge, and it often emerges with words meant to deride.

So what do we do? What does Nehemiah do? Take a look at verses 4 and 5. Having heard them speak words against God's great work, he turns his attention now to speak to God.

It's interesting. He doesn't defend the work before the opposition. He instead begins to speak to God himself.

He goes to prayer. However, the presence of opposition led Nehemiah to seize upon the opportunity for prayer. Now this is very informative.

[12:40] Because we're likely to turn our words back on those who would question the efforts. When God's people are spoken against, God's people speak to God.

Hear, O God, he says, for we are despised. Now look at the nature of his prayer. Turn back their taunts on their own heads.

In other words, take all those words and just throw it back toward them. For they are guilty, verse 5. And notice this. They have provoked you to anger in the presence of the builders. Nehemiah doesn't take this personally. He doesn't take the criticism of the great work that he's engaged in and somehow imbibe it all in and unto himself.

Rather, he says, their provocative words are a provocation against your intention in the world. You know, there are some psalms that are written in this, what they call, post-exilic period.

[13:57] We normally think of most of the Psalter, the psalms coming as earlier, before the time of Nehemiah. But, there's some of these psalms that have this, this post-exilic sound.

Look at Psalm 79. It's worthy of pausing on. This is a prayer. Oh God, the nations have come into your inheritance.

In other words, your world's been overrun by theirs. They've defiled your holy temple. They've laid Jerusalem in ruins. They've given the bodies of your servants to the birds of the heaven for food, the flesh of your faithful to the beasts of the earth.

They've poured out their blood like water all around Jerusalem. There was no one to bury them. We have become a taunt to our neighbors, mocked and derided by those around us.

How long, oh Lord? Will you be angry forever? Will your jealousy burn like fire? Pour out your anger on the nations that do not know you and on the kingdoms that do not call upon your name, for they've devoured Jacob, have laid waste his habitation.

[15:09] Do not remember against us our former iniquities. Let your compassion come speedily to meet us, for we are brought very low. Help us, oh God, of our salvation for the glory of your name.

Deliver us. Atonement for our sins, for your name's sake. Why should the nation say, where is their God? Let the avenging of the outpoured blood of your servants be known among the nations before our eyes.

Let the groans of the prisoners come before you according to your great power. Preserve those doomed to die. Return sevenfold into the lap of our neighbors the taunts with which they have taunted you, oh Lord.

But we, your people, the sheep of your pasture, will give thanks to you forever. From generation to generation, we will recount your praise.

prayers to God for the welfare of God's work.

[16:19] And what's interesting is that that opposition pauses here in verse six with this encouraging word, so they built the wall. In other words, the prayers gave way to persistence and they got halfway done.

Halfway through the project. But look at verse seven, an escalation of the opposition. Now it isn't just Sanballat and Tobiah. Now you have, it says here, the Arabs, the Ammonites, the Ashdodites. In other words, what he's saying is they're coming at God's people from all sides. These groups at that time in history united in opposition against this construction project in which God would have a specially reserved place from which his people would be able to enter and his word would go forth. And if you actually look at the geography or the terrain of verse seven, he's basically saying they came at us from the north, from the south, from the east, from the west.

From all sides, the opposition was escalating. And notice, it went from merely a war of words to verse eight, a decision to come and fight and to cause confusion.

[17 : 40] In other words, to have people enter into the ranks of the church near Jerusalem and begin spinning tales of, watch out, it's going to come from over here and over there and you'll never know when we're going to come and hit it.

It's this escalation. But notice what it says, verse nine, and we prayed to our God. In other words, when the opposition came, Nehemiah prayed on behalf of the people.

When the opposition was escalated, the whole church began to pray. Every person, we prayed. Prayer then became a corporate mark of that community in a limited season of life where they were recommitting themselves to God.

This is why when great things happen for God, they look back in history and go, and it was interesting that as that happened, people had begun praying along the way on the front side. Just the other night, our loft space was used by leaders from all Christian ministries that are laboring together on the University of Chicago campus.

[19 : 03] I'd never seen anything like that before. Undergraduate and graduate students seeking out a place that was large enough where they could gather to pray.

It really wasn't until about two or three years ago that our own congregation reconstituted a Sunday evening every month for prayer and we continue to keep the light on.

Monthly gathering for prayer. How do great things for God get done? One, not without opposition, but with prayer.

Take a look then at 10 through 14 because it's not just without opposition, it's not without discouragement. What's interesting here is that the external threat now gives way to internal tensions.

it isn't the words of the opposition, it's according to verse 10, what was now being said within the church itself.

[20 : 21] In Judah, which is this idea of the whole church, it was said, the strength of those who bear the burdens is failing.

There's too much rubble. By ourselves we'll not be able to rebuild the wall. And all that in the context of having their ear bent by those who are diminishing them.

And even verse 12, at that time the Jews who lived near came from all directions and said to us, ten times you must return to us. What's this a reference to? It's a reference to the fact that people were committing to the project who actually didn't live in the city of Jerusalem.

That they lived 15 miles away, 20 miles away, and that people left their homes to work on the construction site in Jerusalem. And now those friends of the work felt decimated in their own context and fear from their enemy and ten times over they said you have got to pull our guys off that project.

There's nothing here to save us where we are. I love this moment. They're halfway through and their strength fails.

[21 : 46] Halfway through and the word that runs through the corridors of the community is this project is too big. halfway through and the sentiment that is shared is we are in over our heads.

See the initial enthusiasm to see something commence is tested when the realization of the difficulty of it is still upon us.

I think that what's wonderful here is there's no scolding from Nehemiah.

This is just life. He doesn't raise his voice and call everybody out. What does he do though?

It is fascinating to see what he does and how it might inform what we do. Verse 13, 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.

[23 : 08] In other words, he stopped the work and he called an all church congregational gathering and he called them all in the presence of one another so they could actually see I'm not alone there are others engaged and almost as if he has them dressed in the gaps where they can actually see outside what they perceive to be all the threat and having then assembled all the people he begins preaching verse 14 and I looked and arose and said to the nobles and the officials and 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 let me put it this way having spoken to God when derided by opposition in prayer he now speaks to

God's people who have through the difficulty of the labor I use the word preaching here intentionally because there's every indication through these words do not be afraid of them remember the Lord

and this idea that he is great and awesome he is stealing crib notes that Moses used in Deuteronomy 17 to preach to the people before crossing into the land of Jordan he is asking them to remember that this is what you have to do when you're discouraged when you feel overwhelmed when you feel like I don't have the resources and we don't have the resources and all of a sudden you are in a state of confusion in Christian life and what has to happen then is to walk out of the isolated pockets together hear

God's word just take a look at this from Deuteronomy the language connections between what Moses did before they came over the Jordan and what Nehemiah does now that they're trying to rebuild in Deuteronomy 17 now isn't it just fascinating that I do this and I think I've pulled you to the wrong text Deuteronomy 7 17 Moses says if you say in your heart these nations are greater than I how can I dispossess them you shall not be afraid of them but you shall remember what the Lord your God did to Pharaoh and to all Egypt the great trials that your eyes saw the signs the wonders the mighty hand the outstretched arm by which the Lord your God brought you out so will the Lord your God do to all the peoples of whom you are afraid look again verse 21 you shall not be in dread of them for the Lord your God is in your midst here's our phrase again a great and awesome God verse 23 but the Lord your God will give them over to you and throw them into great confusion see this was the confusion was what they were trying to put on God's people and he says that God will deliver you this is what this is what church is for folks I know sometimes you don't always care if we start on time

I know you really care that we end on time but what is the Sunday gathering it is a corporate regathering around the word so that we will remember God so we go to prayer when external threats overwhelm us but we return to proclamation that we would remember who we serve and the strength for us this is what happens in the book of acts with Silas where he actually it actually indicates that he strengthened the church with many words this is something that we need to understand for the next 15 years how do the people of God get strong by giving themselves to many words and in particular the words that are inscripturated that teach us who he is and what he does this is so clear when you get even to something like

[28 : 33] Romans and chapter 15 where he is talking about his desire in Romans chapter 15 in verse 4 for whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction that through endurance and through the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope through the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope we don't gather around the voice of pastor Helm or pastor knee and we don't commit 30 minutes a week or more so that you would hear us we give ourselves as clearly and simply and plausibly as possible to these words that you might be strengthened God's people gathering around God's word hearing his voice so that they can be encouraged to continue on the way this is the plan this is the way great things get done for

God through prayer and through proclamation this is how people come to know who Jesus is through the hearing of the word this is how people who have heard the word and received the word grow in the word this is why the centrality of the word is critical to accomplishing anything great for God this is why the word needs to be at the center lest the people be dispersed in confusion this is what Nehemiah did he brought them all together when everyone was wondering man oh man we have bit off more than we can chew and he sat him down and he read from Deuteronomy 17 and he said let me remind you of what God did in Egypt and he brought them through the Red Sea when you when you are overwhelmed remember!

God see this is the thing there's all kinds of books now on what to do to replenish yourself how are you going to make it to the end take a day off every week take three weeks off every year provide margins pick up a hobby go grab a friend entertain yourself go back to Netflix and we do all these things to reconstitute our strength but the scriptures continually tell us when you need your strength reconstituted go hear somebody explain God's word prayer proclamation that is the way great things get done for God it's that simple this is why in the New Testament they devote themselves to the ministry of the word and to prayer this is why in the New Testament when the church gathers in homes they actually gather in homes around the teaching the apostolic teaching and the prayers how is it then that the people of

God have gotten so far away from Nehemiah's game plan if you want to reconstitute your life for Christ in the coming year give yourself to personal Bible study and private prayer give yourself to the weekly attendance under the word give yourself to gatherings in which people actually who know God pray before God that they can draw you again in fresh ways into the presence of God

and then finally and I'm done 15 and following to the end how do great things get done for God well it won't merely come without opposition or without discouragement but it's not without personal sacrifice and godly resolve nothing great gets done without personal sacrifice and godly resolve notice after that

Sunday sermon in verse 14 verse 15 they were back on the street on Monday morning the enemies had heard that it was known to us and that God was going to frustrate their plan and we all returned to the wall each to his own work they all left church on Sunday and found ways to reconstitute their life under obedience to the word and they rebuilding a place for the Lord and it came with some strategic planning you know Nehemiah basically saying okay half of us are working half of us are watching we're watching and we're praying and we're working and you have all of those wonderful movements in the text of their labor don't you love verse 21 so we labored at the work we worked at the work the work was hard and we worked it we worked the work we worked the problem we persisted that's what they're trying to tell you great things get done for

[34 : 01] God when individuals determine to persist in the work God wants done and amazingly if you want to know the sacrifice there it is verse 22 I 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 in other words they said I know a lot of you guys want to go home at night and you want to go sleep in your bed ten miles away and you want show up in the morning we need you!

in other words that's what he said we gotta have all hands on deck it's gonna cost something there's gonna be personal sacrifice but realize this God will fight for us this is it persistent effort persevering faith individual resolve you know I don't quote many people anymore in the pulpit because simple stories tell it best but it was Winston Churchill on his first speech as prime minister on May of 1940 who said I have nothing to offer you but blood toil tears and sweat we have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind we have before us many many long months of struggle and of suffering you ask me what is our policy it is to wage war with all our might and with all the strength

God gives us you ask me what is our aim it is simply this victory victory at all costs! and your weapons are Ephesians 6 weapons prayer the word of the Lord which is the sword of the spirit and persistence until it's done well our heavenly father this little book much for us to remember Lord when we are hearing of days to come those who wonder why someone would undertake something that would bring the gospel with great renewed vibrance to Chicago South side may we just go to prayer Lord when we when we ourselves find our souls filled with fear and frailty and the avalanche of the work Lord let us hear your preaching and Lord may we build each and every one regardless of sacrifice and persistence of effort Lord let this family do something great for God in Jesus name we pray amen well on your feet out with