

Finding God In the Midst of Opposition

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: 09 March 2022

Preacher: Stefan Matzal

[0:00] That's it. All right, I'm ready. So greetings. Good to be with you this evening. I'm going to take us through Nehemiah chapter 4, Nehemiah chapter 4, and I'm going to read a bit and talk a bit and read a bit and read a bit and read a bit and read a bit and read a bit.

But if you want to follow along in a Bible, there are some that are here. And so this is a particular story of God's people dealing with opposition.

In round numbers, this story takes place in about 450 BC. And this is right. So the Israelites are taken off into captivity in Babylon. And this is a group that comes back and they've rebuilt the temple here.

They're in the process of rebuilding the walls of the city of Jerusalem. You know, I think Ukraine has been on all of our minds. And, you know, Lord willing, if the Russians are pushed out and Ukraine can rebuild, what a process they're going to be going through rebuilding their nation.

Well, that's a little bit what's going on in this story. They're trying to rebuild. And yet they have neighbors who don't want them to rebuild neighbors who are threatened. And the leading neighbor is a man named Sanballat. And a friend of his who's also one of the opponents here is named Tobiah.

[1:39] And I want to begin by reading the first nine verses. And I just want you to notice that in these nine verses, it goes from, oh, this is really, really bad.

We have enemies out to get us to we pray and we make a little progress. Oh, things are looking good to, oh, here come the enemies again.

And it kind of zigzags back and forth. And it's kind of like, you know, if you have, well, I'm sure you can all relate to the idea of, well, I have good days and I have bad days.

Or, you know, it seems like things are going bad and then it turns around and then it turns the other way. One of the things I was thinking about is chronic illness. And talking to someone I know indirectly in the past week who specifically used the phrase, I have good days and I have bad days. Well, that's what's going on in these opening verses here is some good days and some bad days. I'll point them out one by one. And it is really remarkable how much this oscillates back and forth. So, Nehemiah 4, verse 1.

[2:52] 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. That's the opposition. Now, the next few verses are going to turn the other way.

It's going to seem like, you know, a prayer and who cares about the opponents? We're making progress. So this is Nehemiah praying. Hear, O our God, for we are despised.

Turn back their taunt on their own heads and give them up to be plundered in the 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.

[3:59] So we built the wall and all the wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work. All right, so things are looking good. Good day. But what happens immediately is a bad day.

Verse seven. 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 and they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it.

So there's the bad day. Doesn't sound good. But then immediately goes the other direction. Verse nine. And we prayed to our God and set a guard as protection against them day and night.

And I'll stop there for a few minutes. A couple of minutes from now, we'll continue reading. But so first of all, if this is you, that you have this experience of sometimes it seems like, you know, I'm living in victory and sometimes it seems like I'm living in defeat.

I'm just saying that you're not the only person that that's ever happened to. Right. And that's part of what we're seeing here. The other thing I want you to notice here is in verse seven, it says when Sanballat and Tobiah.

[5 : 20] So if you can picture a map of Israel, right? And so, you know, you have the Dead Sea and then you have the Jordan River and the Sea of Galilee. And so they're there in. And if I can get myself oriented to your perspective.

Right. So Jerusalem is a little bit to the west of the Jordan River. And so that's where they are. They're in the area of Judea, Jerusalem.

And so Sanballat, he is governor of like Samaria. So to the north. The Arabs would be to the south. The Ammonites are just to the east on the other side of the Jordan River and the other side of the Dead Sea.

And Ashdod is one of the cities of Philistia. So on the Mediterranean Sea. So this is intentionally saying we now have enemies north, south, east, west. And I was just thinking in terms of opposition, trial, trouble, suffering that you and I go through.

And that, oh, thank the Lord when it only comes at us from one direction at a time. Right. But there are times that they're coming at us from all directions. But I thought just one way to think about this.

[6 : 34] And I don't know if this is a phrase that you use a lot. I think it originally comes from the common book of prayer. But it's a biblical way of thinking about suffering.

And that is just a simple phrase, the world, the flesh, and the devil. And since I've got four points of the compass to deal with, I'll add a fourth. And I've not assigned these to north, south, east, west. But the world, the flesh, the devil. And we could add maybe from the book of Genesis at the beginning, the fall or the curse. So just walk through those for a moment.

Because those are just ways of categorizing the opposition and the suffering that you and I face. So the world would be, I mean, one way of thinking about it is Western culture in its secularized way of thinking.

I remember years ago, when my youngest child is 17 now. But I remember when my older kids were little. And they would watch Barney on TV.

[7 : 45] And I don't know if some of you have been around a while. Does anybody remember Pappy Drew It? It's like a local TV program that was an art program. But I remember once just, you know, it's just good, clean fun for little kids.

But I remember thinking they never talk about God. I mean, those programs, it's secular. It's like do good without God.

I don't know if you heard this. It's like right around when the Russians first began this invasion. I believe this was the ambassador to the UN from Ukraine.

I heard him in a video say, I think this was a little talk he gave at one of those early UN meetings there. He said, war criminals don't go to purgatory.

They go straight to hell. He says this at the UN. And I thought, like an American, like for the last 50 years or more, an American ambassador to the UN would never use religious language at all.

[8 : 48] I mean, we're just in the West. We're just secularized, right? But a Ukrainian can use religious language there in that setting. So I'm just saying to you the world.

And how does the world press in on us? Well, there are a variety of ways in which the world we live in puts non-Christian kind of pressures on us.

If you think in terms of all sorts of aspects of the way the culture around us thinks about sexual morality. Even I was listening to a speaker today.

And there are places where Christians are called into politics. And if that's a calling, that's what we should engage in.

But sometimes there's a temptation to think, well, the culture's gone so far bad. Never mind evangelism anymore. Never mind discipleship. We need to figure out how to get political power.

[9:46] But that's actually falling into the world's ways of thinking, right? If we downgrade the idea of, well, people need their hearts changed by the Lord. So the world. The flesh. Let's say the world was coming in at us from the north and the flesh from the east, right?

This is our own sinful nature. I mean, the stuff that if we're honest with ourselves, when your thinking goes astray, whether it's how you think about yourself or how you think about other people or how you think about the Lord, your sinful nature, right?

The worst enemy sometimes is inside of you. It's that old flesh, that old person. And God has, if you're a follower of Christ, he's renewed you. But there's just still this ongoing battle with the old self that we're supposed to be continually putting off and putting on the new self.

So if we keep going around the circle, the compass, the devil. And I find it interesting that when you get to the book of Revelation and you have all these different figures at the end of the book of Revelation defeated, Babylon the Great is defeated, the beast is defeated, the false prophet. But in the book of Revelation, the last figure to be cast into the lake of fire is the devil, Satan. And so I just say, I'm not the kind of person that, you know, finds Satan hiding under every rock, like that I explain everything by Satan.

[11:12] But I would say all evil, ultimately, underneath it all is Satan. And I say that because I'm just saying the last enemy defeated in the book of Revelation is Satan.

I mean, you get down to everything else is defeated. That's what's left. And so, right, the devil prowls like a roaring lion seeking to devour.

And so that's part of why we face what we face when we face opposition and trial and trouble. And then if I come around just what I was saying before about the fall and the curse.

So I'm just saying everything that comes out of Genesis 3. So we think in terms of Genesis 3, first of all, by the sweat of your brow, and there'll be weeds and thorns.

But illness, death, all the things that trouble us ever since the fall, ever since the curse.

[12:14] And so all of these are opposition that come at us and come at us sometimes lots of them all at once. Sometimes this one, then that one. And so that's part of what our passage is talking to us about.

And I think we want to be thinking about this passage in terms of what does this say about the opposition that I face? What does this say about the opposition that you face from so many different directions?

Now, verses 10, 11, and 12 are actually the low point in this passage. So let me read these three to you. 10, 11, and 12.

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.

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 10 times, You must return to us.

[13:26] So let's start with verse 11. So our enemies said, They will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work. This is actually, You know, there's a way in which verse 1, No, verse 2 was a little bit scary because it said that Sanballat was talking in the presence of the army of Samaria.

So he's got an army on his side. But verse 11 is pretty scary in the sense that It's actually the first time you see the word kill in this story. So the enemies are going to kill, right?

And they're going to stop the work. And this is going to be a surprise attack. They're not going to know. They're not going to see. So verse 11, pretty scary stuff. And on either side of it, Verse 10 and verse 12, The people who are kind of opposed to the project are actually the Jews themselves. So verse 11 is external opposition. But verse 10 and verse 12 is internal demoralization. So this is, It's almost like verse 10 is like little lines of poetry, Almost as if they're like singing a song here. 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. Like, what in the world?

[14:51] I guess it's all over. I mean, if the people are supposed to be building the wall, Are saying, we can't do it. Like, now what do you do? Right?

And then, verse 12, It's like, My English standard version here has a footnote with an alternate translation. The Hebrew is a little difficult.

But I think, I think it's actually understandable. And if you have a different translation in front of you, There's a good chance it reads differently than mine. But the sense of verse 12, I feel quite confident, Is this.

The, I mean, maybe a way to think about it, Is just, Is to think of, To think about Kiev and Ukraine, As an illustration.

Right? So, I mean, What we're seeing is the Ukrainians being very resolute. But what if the Ukrainians were like verse 10, We can't do it.

[15 : 51] Right? So, the idea is, Okay, if you know that a very significant focal point of the battle is going to be Kiev, And you're demoralized, What do the women say to their husbands?

Get out of Kiev. Right? Well, that's what's here. The Jews who live close to Sanballat and the enemies, Are saying to the husbands and the fathers who are in the city of Jerusalem, They're saying, That's where the fighting is going to be worst.

So, please come to us. Get out of Jerusalem. Right? So, does that make sense now? Verse 12, The Jews who live near them, In other words, In the outlying villages, Came from all directions and said to us in the city of Jerusalem, Pull up, Pull out.

You must return to us. Pull out to the villages. So, it's another, It's just like verse 10. So, verse 10 and verse 12 are this demoralized people. Verse 11 is this very severe secret plot.

And so, I say, 10 through 12, It is the gloomiest part of the story. And when you get to the end of verse 12, You're thinking, You know, All is lost. But, Then we come to verses 13, 14, And 15.

[17 : 09] So, This is Nehemiah at work, The leader. 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.

In other words, Nehemiah knows that the enemy is going to come in, And he stations the people at visible points, Where the enemy will say, Oh, If they're ready for us, They're defending the city. Apparently, When he says, By their clans, Because he's going to say, At the very end of this, At the end of 14, Fight for your brothers, Your sons, Your daughters, Your wives, Your homes.

So, It's sort of like he's got this idea, Well, If you're all by your families, Hopefully you'll fight for the whole nation, But you'll also fight for your own family. So, He stations them. Verse 14, 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, And so on. So, I would say that is the message tonight, For me and for you, In our suffering, In the opposition that we face.

[18 : 22] I say to you, As the Lord's representative, In whatever your situation is, Do not be afraid, Remember the Lord, Who is great and awesome.

And if you remember nothing else tonight, Take that with you, And take that into tomorrow's battle, And next week's battle. Remember the Lord, Who is great and awesome. Do not be afraid.

The word awesome, Is the word, Fearsome, Or to be deserving of fear. In other words, You've heard the idea, How do you fight fear of man?

Well, It's by having a greater fear, The fear of the Lord. If you have a sense that the Lord is awesome, You're in awe of him. You fear him, In that worshipful sense. So how do you fight fear, The fears that you face?

Well, You need to have a fear of the Lord. And if you're fearful of the Lord, Not like, Not like feared like you, You know, Run away from a barking dog, That's about to bite you.

[19 : 22] But fear like a moth, Around a flame, Like it wants to get close to the flame, Because it loves the flame, Because that's, That's that honor of the Lord. That kind of fear. That's your antidote for your fears.

Is to see that the Lord, Is great and awesome. And so, Like, Like when you face trial and trouble, In your everyday life, The temptation is, That what fills your eyes, Is the problem, And you lose sight of the Lord.

And so this is saying, No, You've got to fix your eyes on the Lord, And you see your problem, In light of who God is, Not the other way around. And so what happens, When they do that, Is verse 15, 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.

And it's this amazing turnaround, From where we were at, Back in verse, You know, 11 and 12 there. One of the things, That's really amazing, Is how quickly it changes.

And I think, One of the reasons, It changes so quickly, Is because this is a case, Of divine intervention. What does verse 15 say? God had frustrated, Like it's not Nehemiah, And his brilliance, That changed things, Although God used that, And that's there, Right?

[20 : 45] But ultimately, This was divine intervention, God had frustrated their plans, And God is alive today, To intervene in your situation. And the other thing, Notice this, What they said in verse 11, Let's take these one at a time, Look at verse 11, The enemies said, This is like their surprise attack, They will not know, Or see, They will not know, Or see, Okay, So, Verse 15, When our enemies heard, That it was known, Oh, They thought it wouldn't be known, But it was known, And they thought, They wouldn't see, But the first verse, The first word, In verse 14, In the original language, Is the same word, That's up in verse 11, And I looked, Or, And I saw, So, They thought, That the Jews wouldn't see, But Nehemiah saw, Right, And that's part of then, How it flips so quickly, Is that the Lord arranges, That they thought, They were going to be secretive, But, They did know, They did, They did see,

And so it turns around so fast, Now, The rest of the story, I'm going to read the whole thing, And what I want you to notice, Is, Verses 16, Through, 18, Basically, Is that they figured out a way, To both, Work on the wall, Like do something positive, And constructive, Right, And be ready on the defense, At the same time, That's 16, 17, 18, And then the same exact thing, Verse 21, Through 23, Is just the same thing, In a different kind of sense, Where they're able to do both, The offense and the defense, At the same time, And I point that out to you, To say that, What stands out then, Is verses 19 and 20, In the middle, And I'm going to, I'm going to read this whole thing, And then I'm going to talk about, 19 and 20, In the middle, So, When, Let's see, Verse 16, 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, 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, While 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 where 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 the spears, From the break of day, 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, And again that's that, Available to do the work, And prepared, And there are probably ways in which, That's a lesson for us too, In terms of ways that we need to be, Both, Doing constructive work, Building the church, And on guard, For the threats that surround us, But this thing about the trumpet, In the middle here, So we're spread apart, And, And they've got to be spread apart, Because it's a big wall, And they've got to do their work, At different places, But the idea is, If the enemy comes at one particular spot, Nehemiah will be there, He'll sound the trumpet, But everybody will rally there, There's something really, Really fascinating, In this passage, And, It's this, Funny little play on words, And, So you've got to put your thinking caps on, And just follow with me,

And this will make a whole bunch of sense, In a moment, So, We go, This is a, It's a play on words, In the original language, You go back to verse 2, And when I read verse 2, The thing that stands out to me, Second half is Tobiah, No, No, Sanballat's sort of mocking them, Will they revive the stones, Out of the heaps of rubbish, And it, It could easily end with a period, Right there, Will they revive the stones, Out of the heaps of rubbish, And then he adds on, And burned ones at that, And when I read this, And I read it in the original language, It just kind of stands, Like, Why is that added?

[25 : 23] Like, Why does Sanballat add this thing, About the burned ones, And then why does the author of Nehemiah, In telling the story, Bother to add this, That the stones are burned, Right, So, The word here, The Hebrew word is, Seraph, Or a version of Seraph, Do you know, Who are Seraphim?

Seraphim, Right, In Isaiah 6, And Seraphim actually means, Like, Burning ones, Literally burning ones, And so some kind of angel, That's bright like that, And the word for, The letter S, It's a letter

that, If you see it written, Looks like a little W, And depending on whether the dot above it, Is on the left or right side, You either pronounce it as, S, Or, Sh, Right, So it's a great thing for plays on words, Because you can make a word, That looks similar to another word, So if you want to think of an English word, That would be similar to this one, You just think of our English word, From the, From your favorite western movie, The sheriff, The sheriff in town, Says to the bad guy, That you know, There ain't room enough, For the two of us in this town, As they walk towards each other, In the main street, Of the old western town, So, So it's Seraph, But there's a reason I'm saying, Think of an English word, You know, Sheriff, All right, What is, So then, When I read the story, The other thing, That catches my attention, At the end of the story, Is this little thing about the trumpet, And like, Why is that in there? I mean, In a sense, We got the big picture at verse 15, You know, Remember the Lord, And God took care of everything, This trumpet, All right, What's the Hebrew word for trumpet?

Yeah, Shofar, So, Shofar and sheriff, It's just, You take the R and the F, And you flip them, Like sheriff, Or shofar, Right, It is an intentional play on words, In the original language, That you have, Something burning at the beginning, Burned stones, And you're going from the fire, To the trumpet, You're going from suffering, To triumph, And if you think, I'm making this up out of thin air, I don't think you can see it in English, But I really think it is a play on words, That's there in the original language, In this passage, The passage is taking you from being burned up, In your suffering, To the victory of a trumpet, And I just use that to say, That if you, If you look at this passage, In the biggest picture, Right, This line, At the end of verse 20, When you're going to come together, Where the sound of the trumpet is, Right, Our God will fight for us,

And so, I just say, That The most dramatic way, In which we see, Our God fight for us, Is what we're remembering, In Lent, As we come forward, Towards Good Friday, And Easter, Is God fighting for us, On the cross, And Jesus coming, To take our place, And do battle with, Sin and death, In our place, On the cross, And so, You know, You might think, Even in terms of, The trumpet, Of the Old Testament, Feast of trumpets, Which is, Rosh Hashanah, And the day of atonement, And there's a message, About the forgiveness of sins, And the trump of the Lord, Shall sound when Christ returns, And so both, We see trumpets, In his first coming, Trumpets in his second coming, And so, You may not, Experience victory, In exactly the way you wish, In exactly the way you want, Exactly the timing you want, And maybe you will, Maybe you won't,

[29:09] But as you suffer, And as you deal with the world, And the flesh, And the devil, And the fallenness, Of our world, And you go through your struggles, And you're remembering, To remember the Lord, And to keep him, In front of you, One way or another, The trumpet will sound, And God's victory, Will happen, And so there is hope, And something to look forward to, In the midst of trial, And suffering, That gives you, Gives you perspective, So, Remember the Lord, Who's great and awesome, And remember that our God, Will fight for us, And I pray that that's, A good kick off, To your thinking about Lent, And how to prepare for Easter, So, My pleasure to be here, Do you have, Comments or questions, Or, I'd be glad to talk about, The passage, Or talk about suffering, And,