

Standing Firm Against the Foe

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[0 : 00] And last week we saw in Nehemiah chapter 2 that the Jews commit themselves to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

After years of oppression by neighbouring nations, this small group of people now see that God will give them success as they undertake the huge task of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.

Chapter 3 of Nehemiah, which we've skipped over in the readings, tells us about the organisation of the work as the walls are rebuilt.

People are divided into various groups to rebuild and we see that everyone is involved, all the Jewish people are involved. It's a combined effort, if you like, much like you see when we have a church right here, it's a combined effort of all the people here, it's a great thing to see.

There's a sense of unity and hope and a new sense of unity and hope amongst the people. It's a kind of revival, if you like. And God is doing a marvellous work.

[1 : 06] Now someone told me during the week that when the 1959 Billy Graham crusade came to Melbourne, there was a great sense of hope among God's people here in this city.

Now I wasn't around then, not because I wasn't living in Melbourne. I just wasn't around. So if you can remember back to 1959, that might be something that you too can remember.

And there, I'm sure, are pockets of great sense of God working in our own lives as we look here at Holy Trinity to see the things that have been going on here, how the church has grown and so on.

Well, that's as a result of God working in the lives of his people. Now today as we turn to chapter 4, we discover that this rebuilding project was carried out in the face of ruthless and unrelenting opposition.

The human instigators of the attack are two of the evil trio whom we met in Nehemiah chapter 2, the villains, if you like, Sanballat and Tobiah.

[2 : 13] They were assisted in their vicious assault on God's people by the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites of verse 7 in chapter 4. And these people lived in the land once occupied by the Philistines.

You know the stories of David and Goliath. Goliath was a Philistine. And they were long-standing enemies of the Jewish people. So the builders of the walls of Jerusalem, they were encircled.

They had Sanballat in the north, Tobiah in the east, the Arabs down there in the south, and the Ashdodites posing a threat in the west.

They were encircled by all these warring nations. However, God did not desert his people, but he gave them strength and courage to come through their various trials.

He supported his people, not only because of his special love for them, but also because he had his eye on the future of the Jewish race.

[3 : 16] The leadership of Nehemiah and the faith of the Jews were tested, if you like, to the limits. His handling of harassment and the subsequent temptation to discouragement is full of instruction for those feeling the pressure of doing the Lord's work.

It enables one, as we read this, to stand firm, as Nehemiah did, to stand firm against the foe. Now the way we deal with frustrations in Christian work and in our personal lives show what kind of people we are as well.

So what sort of opposition is it that Nehemiah and the Jewish people are up against? Well, if you are following along in your Bibles, in chapter 4, verses 1 to 3, we see that it is the ridicule of Sanballat and Tobiah.

And in verse 1, we see that anger was the root cause of Sanballat's ridicule. Now Sanballat, who is to the north of Jerusalem, was the governor of Samaria.

And Sanballat saw Jerusalem as a threat to Samaria in more ways than one. Now on more than one occasion here, I've spoken about the hatred that there was between the Jews and the Samaritans.

[4 : 38] They never got on well. And so there was that sort of natural rivalry, just like there is between any Carlton and Collingwood player, or Swans and Essendon player, perhaps, from last night.

But the rivalry between the Samaritans and the Jewish people was much more intense. But perhaps more important for Sanballat was the impact trade would have on Samaria to surrounding countries if Jerusalem was a safe and secure place.

Now remember, Jerusalem is lying in ruins. It's been lying like this for around about 90 years. And now, if Jerusalem was safe, you know, if the walls were rebuilt and it was a safe haven and so on, it will attract trade.

And the reason it will attract trade is due to its central location. Trading partners with Egypt and all those people around them and so on. And if it had become an important place, its central location, then this would damage Samaria's economic viability.

So it was a threat for Sanballat in more ways than one. Now because of the patronage of Cennat-Azerxes, who had given permission for Nehemiah to travel to Jerusalem, remember, and to rebuild the city walls, Sanballat was really rather restricted in the way that he could go and attack the Jews.

[6 : 06] Like, he didn't have a mandate to go and war against the people because Artaxerxes had given permission for Nehemiah to rebuild. And he wasn't allowed to go into battle.

But here we see, in these verses, that he uses other devices along with Tobiah to attack the Jews in Jerusalem.

And just like a frilled-necked lizard displays its neck to put fear into a predator, or a blue-toned lizard if you've ever seen one, hisses when you threaten it or try to sort of attack it or something.

Sanballat and Tobiah do the same thing here. Not with puffing up their neck, but with words. And Sanballat opens his diatribe with lies and wounding sarcasm.

In verse 2, what are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore things? Sanballat's attempting to put the Jews down. He's attempting to destroy their self-esteem.

[7 : 13] Will they sacrifice, he goes on to say. Here he's ridiculing their faith in God. And it was like asking, do they imagine prayer can make walls grow?

Were the Jews sensitive about the faith of their fathers? Half ashamed are they perhaps. Perhaps they're half ashamed about their faith in God. After all, this God had apparently allowed them to end up in the mess that they were in.

It's all around them, there's evidence of it. Maybe, maybe they secretly wondered themselves if the sacrifices would do any good. So this display of ferocity and sarcasm was being used by Sanballat to awaken fear within the people, the Jewish people.

Now similar thoughts haunt us from time to time, don't they? Questions like, will it matter if I pray? Will it really make a difference? Does God really care?

Is God really there? You see, if we are sensitive about the apparent absurdity of believing in an invisible God, the arrow of ridicule, the little doubts which come into our mind, will be sure to find a chink in our own armour.

[8 : 29] And potentially, that could incapacitate us. At the end of verse 2, Sanballat asks a fourth question of ridicule.

Will they revive the stone out of the heaps of rubbish and burn ones at that? Now this question refers to the fierce heat that can change the chemical make-up of stones, and thus robbing them of their strength.

Now if our church was to burn down, if the roof burnt down and all these stones were caught up within the heat and so on, I'm told that they would be useless, that we would be unable to use the stones again to rebuild the church.

Well, I don't think that's the case that's going on here. The stones at the walls of Jerusalem were not useless.

They still represented good building material. Sure, the city had been burned and so on, but the gates had been burned, but not necessarily all the stones had been destroyed and so on.

[9 : 36] So Sanballat is throwing these doubts, trying to bring doubts into the minds of the people of Jerusalem. And these lies, these taunts and the ridicule, were thrown in to discourage the people who had committed themselves, as we saw last week, to the task of rebuilding this city wall.

Now any time that we are engaged in a work for God, we are likely to encounter the poison-tipped arrows of ridicule from Satan.

A barrage of truth mingled with lies, with innuendo, with malicious gossip and implied threats is the normal experience of Christians and Christian leaders seeking to do God's work.

Malice arises from fear, and fear is a common response to someone else's success. So as Christians seeking to serve God, expect, therefore, to have your faults thrown in your face and your progress belittled, hampered in some way.

Now if it happens, or when it happens, allow yourself to be cut down to size. But don't let it dismay you. You know, the only Christian that Satan likes is a ton-tied, ineffective one.

[11 : 06] And he will play on your secret fears and inferiorities to make you one of them. Speaking personally, I am full of fears and chasms of inferiority.

When I have listened to Satan pointing them out within me, I have stopped working for the kingdom. Yet in those moments, when I have refused to listen to him and have feebly walked in obedience, I have been amazed at what God has done with my feeble performance.

Well, how do Nehemiah and the Jewish people respond to these taunts and ridicule from their enemies?

Nehemiah prayed. That's what he did. Here was a critical moment, and the future of the building being undertaken, only just recently started, was in the balance.

And so what does Nehemiah do? He prays. He goes and prays. And this oughtn't surprise us, because Nehemiah prayed when he received distressing news from his brothers about the Jews in Jerusalem in chapter 1.

[12 : 21] He also prayed when Censur of Xerxes demanded to know the reason for his sad face in chapter 2. Prayer was the instinctive reaction of this godly person, Nehemiah, when confronted with a crisis.

Now, unlike many people who only pray in desperation when everything else has failed, we see here, Nehemiah prayed.

Nehemiah poured out his heart to God rather than entering into the futile arguments with his opponents. How often do we get caught up in futile arguments? He believed that the rebuilding of the wall was God's work, and he would bring it, God would bring it, to a successful end.

So in verse 20, we see that Nehemiah tells his team, Our God will fight for us. He's confident in God.

Now, there's two things I want you to notice in the prayer of verses 4 and 5, which is the prayer that Jude's Nehemiah brings up. In the first part of verse 4, he appeals to the merciful God.

[13 : 30] The words, Hear, O our God, point out the basis of his plea. And that is, we are reminded of God's unique relationship with his people.

Surely, God would come to the relief of his own people who were despised. Well, the Bible tells us that God feels all the pains of his suffering people.

Back then, and today, he feels all the pains. One such passage which makes this point is Isaiah 63, verse 9. In all their distress, it was no messenger or angel, but his presence that saved them.

He lifted them up and carried them all the days of his life. Isn't that a beautiful picture? He carried them. The angel is none other than the man of sorrows who is familiar with suffering.

The suffering servant, Jesus himself, as Isaiah 53 alludes to. So the first thing is that Nehemiah appeals to the merciful God. Secondly, in verses 4 and 5, Nehemiah beseeches the God of justice.

[14 : 42] Nehemiah prays that his antagonists, Sanballat and Tobiah and their allies and so on, may themselves receive the evil which they had wished for God's people.

Nehemiah is asking God here to pour out his wrath on Sanballat and his allies. They're pretty strong prayers. Now how do you explain those sorts of prayers which do come up from time to time in the Bible as one of these prayers we see right now?

Does this give us a mandate to pray for God's wrath and anger to be poured out on people who may hurt us? The answer to that is seen when we realise here for example that Nehemiah's prayer was concerned for the glory of God.

Not for himself but for God. You see, when Sanballat and Tobiah mocked the Jews, God's chosen people, they were hurling insults and so on at them, they were in actual fact mocking and scorning God.

They were in danger of provoking God to anger. Now, that doesn't mean that God's anger against Sanballat and Tobiah was not irreversible.

[16 : 01] Of course it's not. Their own repentance would guarantee their mercy. But what we see here is that Nehemiah takes his anger, his frustrations and his pleas to the right person.

That is, God himself. The God that we learn about in the Bible who is the creator and the redeemer, the saviour of everything that we know around us.

And we should take encouragement from this prayer because what it shows us is that God takes a personal interest in all that happens to us.

And we are precious to him. And God is offended when some unbeliever pokes fun at our faith in him. And we also learn from his prayer that the secret of overcoming opposition lies in our relationship with God.

As I was thinking about this, that song Take it to the Lord in Prayer comes to mind. When we are facing opposition and persecution, hard times and so on, that hymn Take it to the Lord in Prayer.

[17 : 11] Are you weak and heavy laden? Take it to the Lord in Prayer. And leave it with God. Leave it there. The immediate response of Nehemiah to the mockery of Sambalat in this situation was to pray.

And then he urged the builders to get back to their work. He left, he prayed and he left it with God and got back to work. Verse 6, So we rebuilt the wall.

Simple statement isn't it? The simplicity of it and the behaviour recorded of that statement makes Sambalat and his friends suddenly appear rather small and dwarfed by the faith, unity and energy of the weak.

That is the Jewish people that are surrounding them. And together God's people are standing firm against the foe. Nehemiah wouldn't allow the Jewish people to sit around licking their wounds.

He urged them to pick up their tools and to start building again. And so today busy Christians will not have time to fret about the taunts of the ungodly.

[18 : 21] Take it to the Lord in prayer. Leave it with God and get on with what God has called you to do. Well that's the reaction of Nehemiah. It is to pray and to get on with the work of rebuilding the wall.

Now when Sambalat and his mates, his allies, realised that their ridicule had failed to stop the work, they then threatened the Jews with violence in verse 8. And the response of Nehemiah is quick.

We pray to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night. Again, his prayer is the basis of his subsequent action.

He sets a 24 hour guard stationing watchers with great care. In verse 13, So in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall in open places, I stationed the people according to their families with their swords, their spears and their bows.

Mindful of the family dynamics and what motivates people to fight, Nehemiah stations them in family groupings and sees that they are well armed. He doesn't leave them unarmed, he sees that they are well armed.

[19 : 37] And the moment, if you think about it, it's a terrifying one. It's one thing to know that danger threatens, but quite another to stand by a crack in the wall with the sword in hand to contemplate and contemplate what you will do if a yelling enemy breaks through it.

Well, Nehemiah perceives that fear and like a good leader, he speaks to them personally and sympathetically. He offers no cliches, but speaks from his own experience.

In verse 14, he says, don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord who is great and awesome. And fight for your king, your sins, your daughters, your wives, and your homes.

He speaks from experience. It is God who has brought him to this point so far. And God who will fight for him, in the words of Nehemiah. God who will give him the victory.

Now the thing that stands out here is what Nehemiah did. That is, he kept on building, continued on building, despite the threats surrounding him and God's people.

[20 : 48] It was always his plan to do what God had called him to do, no matter what obstacles may get in the way. Now he could have taken a few options here.

He could have called a halt to the rebuilding process and waited for San Belat and his mates to get used to the idea of the wall being rebuilt. But I think if they had done that, then the wall would never have been rebuilt.

We've seen the history of that. Secondly, he could have considered a pre-emptive strike against San Belat and his allies and so on. I don't think that would have been a wise decision either.

Instead, Nehemiah chose to organise defences to meet the crisis and resume building as soon as the immediate danger had passed, to continue on the work that he had been called to do, in other words.

And the danger soon passed. Once word got back to Nehemiah's enemies that a victory from a surprise attack was unlikely, their enthusiasm for the project seems to have disappeared.

[21 : 51] In verse 15, when our enemies heard that their plot was known to us and that God had frustrated it, God was the person who stopped all this and frustrated the plan, we all returned to the wall, each to his work.

work. But precautions were taken. In verse 16, an armed guard was maintained. In verse 17 and 18, the builders likewise were armed.

And those who lived in the surrounding cities around Jerusalem were obliged to stay overnight in Jerusalem in case of invasion, to stay together, verses 21 and 22. Each person, worker or guard, kept an ear open for the warring sound of the trumpet, summoning them to fight against the foe.

And the rebuilding work was so urgent and the danger of a raid so pressing that they did not even have time to change their clothes as they slept or sleep, as verse 22 and 23 suggest.

So that's kind of Nehemiah's reaction to the whole process of the ridicule of Sanballat and Tobiah. And if we go back to verse 10 and a couple of verses on, we see the Jewish people's reaction to Sanballat and Tobiah's taunts and so on.

[23 : 15] And from verse 10, there was great despondency and despair amongst God's people. The task and the troubles ahead all looked too much for them.

But the despondency, as we read on, as we've already done, the despondency that was there is replaced with renewed vigour for God and for their God-given mandate to erect the walls of Jerusalem.

And what thought about this change? It was the fresh realisation of the presence of their mighty defender. Verse 20, our God will fight for us.

God fought for his people, not because he was the tribal God of the Jews, but rather to move forward his plan to bring salvation to sinful men and women through Jesus Christ, who was born within the pale of the Jewish race.

So the Jews are despairing, I guess, but through the strong leadership and courage of Nehemiah, they see that God will fight for them.

[24 : 33] Now what sort of battle are we as God's people facing today? Well, we are engaged as Christians Christians in a warfare.

As Ephesians says, not against enemies of the blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

The Apostle Paul's teaching in this verse, in Ephesians 6 verse 12, is that behind all human antagonism to the gospel message and against ourselves as Christians, is the might of Satan and his powerful regiment, if you like, of demons.

It's real, friends. But the Lord who has enlisted us in his army is more powerful than the devil, much more. Our divine captain, if you like, equips us with armour and gives us strength to conquer.

And in the language of Nehemiah, our God will fight for us. And with God on our side, we can stand firm against the foe.

[25 : 48] With God's work then and now, is accomplished by faith. It's not always going to be easy work either. It's going to be hard from time to time.

But as his servants, we need to continue on that work. The confidence that we have as Christians is seen in the next hymn that we're going to sing by Edith Cherry.

It's number 446. I want to read you two verses from it. Verse 1 and verse 3. We trust in you, our shield and our defender.

We do not fight alone against the foe. Strong in your strength, safe in your keeping tender, we trust in you and in your name we go.

And verse 3. We go in faith, our own great weakness feeling and needing more each day your grace to know. Yet from our hearts a song of triumph appealing.

[26 : 57] We trust in you and in your name we go. One day the Lord will give to his faithful soldiers a crown of righteousness.

Something to look forward to. Let's stand and sing hymn number 446.