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Nehemiah 4

(2021)

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Although I believe my aim is pure and God's will perfect this document is still the product of a human man, as to such I neither claim perfect knowledge or perfect understanding.

Nehemiah 4.

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

In 445 B.C. the Persian King Artaxerxes gave Nehemiah, an Israelite who was a trusted official written permission to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Nehemiah went with the third wave of returning Jewish exiles. There was intense opposition from other people in the land, and disunity within Jerusalem. Despite the strong opposition, Nehemiah rebuilt the walls and overcame many threats. He served twice as governor and did what God had put in his heart (Neh. 2:12) (Neh. 7:5), and found that the joy of the LORD was his strength (Neh. 8:10). For an overview of the entire book see the title: "Overview of the Book of Nehemiah" (at the beginning of the index to Nehemiah).

THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER

The high priest, the priests, Levites, officers, rulers, court guards, craftsmen, labourers, men, wives, sons and daughters all worked together to repair the walls and the Sheep Gate, the Fish Gate, the Gate of Yeshanah (old gate in KJV), the Valley Gate, the Dung Gate, the Fountain Gate, the Water Gate, the Horse Gate, the East Gate, the Muster Gate and the Sheep Gate.

NEHEMIAH 4:1-2

- **Nehemiah 4:1-2:** Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews. ² 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?"

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When Sanballat (a Samaritan leader) heard that the Jews were building the wall, he was filled with contempt and such aggressive anger he spoke in a belittling manner to ridicule, mock, demean, taunt and intimidate the Jews to instil in their minds that they were nothing but foolish builders, for their work was futile and they had no hope of ever finishing it. He spoke all this in the presence of his brothers (those united with him against the Jews) and of the army of Samaria, most likely with the intention of influencing them to rise up against Nehemiah and all those working on the wall with him.

The Jews lack of wealth, their limited numbers, the mammoth task of rebuilding the walls to establish a strong defence for the city, would have strengthened Sanballat hostile attempt to ridicule and belittle them, especially with the army of Samaria standing alongside him.

NEHEMIAH 4:3

- **Nehemiah 4:3:** 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!"

Tobiah was governor over the Ammonites, he most likely mentions foxes because they were very numerous in these parts, and after the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon they were known to frequently infest in great numbers the ruined and desolate places in the Mount and City of Zion.

- For Mount Zion which lies desolate; jackals (the foxes in KJV) prowl over it. (Lamentations 5:18).

The expression, "if a fox goes up it will break down their stone wall," does not mean that the wall was so low that foxes could easily climb over it, and that the materials were so bad and the work so poorly done that the wall was so weak the weight of a fox would cause it to literally crumble if a fox did stand on it as some teach, but is simply another form of ridicule to demean, debase and humiliate all those labouring on the wall.

NEHEMIAH 4:4-5

- **Nehemiah 4:4-5:** 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. ⁵ 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.

Hear, O our God: the answer that the children of God had against their enemies was to always flee to God in prayer. Here we see this good practise manifested throughout this book in the prayers of Nehemiah who deeply devoted to God turned everything to God in prayer no matter what came across his path.

The expression, "They have provoked thee," carries a tone of holy revenge against enemies and righteous anger for the honour of God. The following expressions:

- Turn back their taunt on their own heads.
- Give them up to be plundered in a land where they are captives.
- Do not cover their guilt.
- Let not their sin be blotted out from your sight.

May seem harsh, cruel and vindictive to Christians today, since the Lord Jesus Christ taught all Christians:

- Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. (Matt. 5:43-44):
- Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. (Luke 6:27).
- Love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return,

And he went on to say:

- Your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. (Luke 6:35).

However, Israel of old was under the Old Testament Covenant. Waring against enemies was not only common, but when they did that which was right, the Angel of the Lord went before them, and God fought with them, since He promised they would be the head and not the tail, if they obeyed the covenant, they entered into on Mount Sinai with Him.

Today we are under a totally different covenant, a covenant sealed with the blood of our Saviour who under extreme suffering and agonies, prayed for the forgiveness of those who crucified him.

This prayer is not arising from an attitude of hatred and revenge, but from a heart a devoted and sincere zeal for the glory of God and the success of His work. When we keep the Old Testament covenant in mind and the fact that Nehemiah and those with him, not only regarded the Samaritan leaders as enemies to the purposes of God and His people, but also to God Himself, and therefore viewed them as being deserving of God's judgments, it is easy to understand that Nehemiah's prayer was arising from a man who was passionate for God's honour and from a heart deeply devoted to God.

One of the most striking characteristics of Nehemiah is his prayers, this is the first of his prayers, following are a few snippets from his other prayers:

- Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people. (Neh. 5:19):
- For they (enemies) all wanted to frighten us, thinking, “Their hands will drop from the work, and it will not be done.” But now, O God, strengthen my hands. (Neh. 6:9):
- Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God, according to these things that they did, and also the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who wanted to make me afraid. (Neh. 6:14).
- Remember me, O my God, concerning this, and do not wipe out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God and for his service. (Neh. 13:14).
- Then I commanded the Levites that they should purify themselves and come and guard the gates, to keep the Sabbath day holy. Remember this also in my favour, O my God, and spare me according to the greatness of your steadfast love. (Neh. 13:22).
- Remember them (enemies), O my God, because they have desecrated the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites. (Neh. 13:29).
- and I provided for the wood offering at appointed times, and for the firstfruits. Remember me, O my God, for good. (Neh. 13:31).

NEHEMIAH 4:6

- **Nehemiah 4:6:** 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 the wall was joined together to the half its height, meaning the work, began at the sheep-gate, and ended there, it was divided into different sections which were given to the builders, and now the whole circumference of the wall was completely built around the entire city, but at this stage only up to half its full height.

NEHEMIAH 4:7-8

- **Nehemiah 4:7-8:** 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.⁸ And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it.

The Arabians: a band of men largely comprised of Arabians.

Ammonites and Ashdodites: over who Tobiah was governor formed a portion of the army of Samaria under the influence of Sanballat.

The Ashdodites: were of Ashdod or Azotus, they were one of the principalities of the Philistines who were always enemies to the Jews:

Enemies of the Jews: Since Nehemiah had written authority from the king of Persia to carry out the work on the wall, the tribes mentioned here under the influence of Sanballat would have only been relatively small parties, for the great majority of those under the king’s rule would not have risked acting against his will and his authority.

The breaches were beginning to be closed: meaning the gaps in the wall that the Babylonians had made when they demolished and burned the city were almost fully repaired.

They were angry: Sanballat, Tobiah and those with them had suspected that the work on the wall would not be finished, so when they heard that it was rapidly progressing, they were angry at the Jews and perhaps angry at themselves for being so slow in opposing it.

They all plotted together: dreading danger from the growing success of the Jews, Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the Ashdodites were all united together in their opposition to the work of God, but why? What wrong had the Jew done them, or were they planning to do them harm? The answer to these questions is a simple no, for the Jews at this time lived peaceably alongside them. Sanballat and those with him opposed and persecuted the Jews out of envy and malice. They hated the religiousness of the Jews, despised their prosperity, and no doubt feared they would become a superior power, and for these reasons desired to stop the work on the wall so they formed a conspiracy to surprise the Jews with an attack to demolish their works.

When the plot was discovered Nehemiah put in place measures that would ensure the safety of all, and allow the building of the walls to continue. Prior to this all guards were involved in the building work, but now half of them were withdrawn to be constantly armed and on guard, however, since the circumference of the wall was so large (around 4 km many of the workers were some distances apart from each other so they worked with a trowel in one hand and a sword in the other.

Added to this Nehemiah kept a trumpeter by his side, so that, on any new of a surprise, an alarm would be immediately sounded for all on wall to hear, by these precautions, the plots of their enemy were defeated, and the work continued on. Nehemiah's, vigilance and fervent passion for God and his heroic devotion and high qualities made him a most suitable leader for the demands of the crisis. He anticipated every difficulty and took suitable measures to overcome and defeat every obstruction that would come against him and the work of God.

Since this uprising of Sanballat, Tobiah and those with them at this stage had not yet involved any acts of violence, but only threatening and mocking words to intimidate the builders, it is possible it had not yet come to the attention of the king of Persia on the other side of the River Euphrates.

NEHEMIAH 4:9

- **Nehemiah 4:9:** And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night.

In prayer they no doubt asked God for direction and help, and afterward set guards opposite each place where the different groups camped. It is a well-known principal that common hatred of the same enemy has the power to unit former foes. Samaritans, Arabs of the desert, Ammonites, and inhabitants of Ashdod in the Philistine plain would never have united together had they not had a common enemy.

Hatred and malice brought them together for this period of time into one. History evidences that it is a principal in this world, that God's work is attacked from all sides and the Bible teaches us that in the last days, an antichrist will arise who will influence much of the world to view Christ as their common enemy and gather them together to rise up against Christ. Nehemiah's faith highlights three ways for us to overcome discouragements and opposition to God's work:

1. **Prayer:** always remain in close relationship to God and the Lord Jesus Christ
2. **Watchfulness:** always be alert and watchful for temptations or enemies that would lead us away from our faith.
3. **Work:** always be prepared to lay your hand to whatever is needed.

Preparation, watchfulness and prayer is central for good Christian character

NEHEMIAH 4:10

- **Nehemiah 4:10:** 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.”

The statement, “Judah said,” could carry the following two meanings:

1. The Jews working on the wall were saying that now that their labour force had been greatly diminished, because many were taken to stand guard, that the burden of finishing the wall was too great because there was way too much rubble for them to remove on their own.
2. The Jews still dwelling in their towns and villages in the land of Judah, had heard it said, that the strength of those who bear the burden of completing the wall is failing, because there is too much rubble for them to remove by themselves.

It matters little which one of these is correct, since both carry the same idea.

NEHEMIAH 4:11-12

- **Nehemiah 4:11-12:** And our enemies said, “They will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work.”¹² At that time the Jews who lived near them came from all directions and said to us ten times, “You must return to us.”

The plan of Sanballat and Tobiah was to launch a sudden secret (perhaps during the night or early morning), surprise attack on Jerusalem, knowing that the builders would have no weapons to fight with, and so would be easily slain, rather than openly showing themselves threatening an attack by marching their armies up before the city as was common for armies to do.

If the enemy had come amongst the workers on the wall with an army, they would certainly have succeeded in killing them and stopping the work, since all labourers on the wall were unarmed, and not prepared to defend themselves against such a secret, instant surprise attack. The ultimate goal was not killing the builders, but to bring the building work on the wall to an end.

The Jews that remained in their towns and villages upon hearing of Sanballat and Tobiah's plan to attack Jerusalem sent ten messengers to the city to urge all those working on the wall to immediately return to their own towns and villages for safety and perhaps to help protect their loved ones should Sanballat and Tobiah turn their armies toward them.

NEHEMIAH 4:13-14

- **Nehemiah 4:13-14:** So in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, in open places (*and* on the higher places in KJV), I stationed the people by their clans (after their families in KJV) with their swords, their spears, and their bows.¹⁴ 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.”

The lower places: (v13) probably refers to those places where the new building work was lowest, which would be the most likely places to attack.

The open places (higher places in KJV): (v13) probably refers to the tops of the walls and the towers that were highest from which they could better see the enemy coming and shoot arrows or throw spears and large stones against them when they made their approaches.

Trowels in one hand and swords in the other: (v13) upon hearing of Sanballat and Tobiah's intended surprise attack, Nehemiah prepares the city. Obviously, the labourers who carried stones would not be able to carry a sword in one hand, for they would need both hands to do their work. However, it is certain they would have had a sword strapped to their side. It is a biblical principal that when things are not mentioned the writer, supposes we would use common sense to fill in the gaps. The lesson we can learn from this story, is that God's people must be prepared for obstacles, troubles and hardships as well as work.

NEHEMIAH 4:15-18

- **Nehemiah 4:15-18:** 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. 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, ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built. The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me.

God brought Sanballat and Tobiah evil plot to secretly come upon His people to nothing. Once the Jewish enemies knew they had no hope of surprising them now that they knew of their intention to attack and were prepared for it, they forsook their evil plan. The Jews wasted no time in celebration, but returned to their work for the building of the wall was the primary focus. Nehemiah had prepared the city for an imminent attack and in doing so prevented the attack.

The man who sounded the trumpet was by me: (v18) the work was large and widespread so the workers were separated far from each other, and because of this Nehemiah was constantly moving around the wall to oversee the work and therefore kept the trumpeter by his side, so that should any danger appear, he could call all the workers to arms. The great and heavenly Captain who is forever alongside every faithful Christian will one glorious day sound His trumpet and all who belong to his Kingdom will hear its sound, and whether alive or dead, be gathered up to be with him.

- In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. ⁵³ For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. ⁵⁴ When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." (1 Corinthians 15:52-54) (also 1 Cor. 15:51-54).

NEHEMIAH 4:19-20

- **Nehemiah 4:19-20:** 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. ²⁰ In the place where you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us."

This chapter highlights the truth that the words, "Our God will fight for us," does not mean that we can live as we please and do as we will, trusting God will by some supernatural or mystical means protect and bless us.

We must always watch for temptations, worldly pleasures that will lure us away from God and for men and women who will attempt to entice us away from our faith and never expect that all obstacles and hardships will be over until the Lord's work is completed. Every faithful Christian is both a labourer and a soldier, working with one hand, and fighting against all

that would hinder their faith with the other. We must all wait for the close of life, never putting off our armour until our work and warfare are ended; then we shall be welcomed to the glorious rest and joy of the Lord.

NEHEMIAH 4:21-23

- **Nehemiah 4:21-23:** So we labored at the work, and half of them held the spears from the break of dawn until the stars came out (from the rising of the morning till the stars appeared in KJV).²² 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 labour by day.”²³ 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.

The expression, “from the break of dawn until the stars came out,” (from the rising of the morning till the stars appeared in KJV), carries the idea of working very early and very late.

Let every man and his servant pass the night within Jerusalem: meaning no longer should they return to the suburbs or their towns and villages that were nearby, as probably many of them had done at the end of the days’ work and returned in the morning, but now they were all to lodge in Jerusalem for the following three reasons:

1. For greater security of the city
2. To take turns to watch through the night
3. To work longer hours on the wall.

None of us put off our clothes: meaning they only took their clothes off for washing to clean themselves and their clothes, other than these times they remained clothed so that they were always ready to fight, if any assault was made on the city.

SUMMARY

Throughout history many good works designed to enhance God’s Kingdom has brought scorn, ridicule and contempt by proud scoffers. It is only natural for those who have antagonism against the Christian faith to unite against the faithful church, either by outward force or subtle passive means. Once Nehemiah became aware of such enemies, he did not answer them according to their evil, but firstly brought himself, his griefs, his fears and his cause before God in prayer, and after praying, set a watch against the enemy and did all that was in his power to do to prevent his enemy from succeeding in their evil plot. If we think to gain Gods favour by prayer, without faithfulness, labour and doing what we are able, we are fooling ourselves and will forfeit God’s favour, blessing and protection, for He does not bless laziness and idleness.

As the founder of Bible House of Grace, I would like to thank the many Christian scholars, commentators and theologians who have gone before me, and the many today, who have freely made available their works to enhance the knowledge of the Bible to all people worldwide. It is only with the help of these faithful writers that much of Bible House of Grace exists as it does today.
