

THE REVITALIZING AND REBUILDING OF GCC

“SATAN HATES A GOOD THING”

Introduction

With the work of rebuilding begun, one of Nehemiah’s tasks was to reassure his brothers and sisters that the opposition they immediately faced, particularly its severity, was nothing more than what they should expect. Indeed, they should take comfort from it, knowing that it was evidence that what they were doing was a good thing—and Satan hates a good thing and will always endeavor to destroy it.

Sermon Guide

A CHALLENGE TO MORALE

Sanballat addressed his people “in the presence of his brothers and of the army of Samaria” in terms of ridicule and mockery: “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?” (v. 2). Words do hurt, and psychological intimidation has often sapped the energy from the most powerful and brave. The success of the building program was in large measure dependent on harmonious work.

Sanballat lobbed the following missiles in their direction:

- “What are these feeble Jews doing?” *See what a poor, incompetent lot they really are!*
- “Will they restore their wall?”¹ *The task is beyond their ability!*
- “Will they sacrifice?” *Do they think that a few devotional exercises will cause this wall to rise as if by magic?*
- “Will they finish up in a day?” *Do they have any idea how long this will take them?*
- “Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, and burned ones at that?” *Don’t they know that burned stones [probably made of limestone] crumble when exposed to heat?*²

Each one of these was a powerful missile, but collectively they were designed to instill fear and cause the Israelites to second-guess their wisdom in undertaking this task. Tobiah added his barb to the mix, calling their work so unstable that even a fox walking on it in the night would cause it to fall down (Neh. 4:3).

Did the psychological intimidation work? It worked to the extent that Nehemiah took it seriously.

AN IMPRECATORY PRAYER

Imprecatory are prayers that invoke judgment, calamity, or curses, upon one's enemies or those perceived as the enemies of God. Driven by a desire to see this work done for the glory of God, Nehemiah once again demonstrated his belief in the power of prayer. It was prayer that had brought him to Jerusalem in the first place (Neh. 1:4–11; 2:4). Now, in the face of the most serious opposition he had faced, so soon after his return, Nehemiah took the matter directly to the Lord, pleading for his ear (4:4–5), and inspiring others to pray as he did so (4:9).

The prayer is brief and to the point, written down in the text (Neh. 4:4–5) without any introduction such as: “Then Nehemiah turned to the Lord and prayed.” “This sudden prayer, quite unannounced, transports the reader back to the very moment of dismay, as if this were an extract from the day’s record, simply copied as it stood.”³ There is no time for flowery words or extended devotion. An urgency about the situation requires immediacy and focus. Before the rot of despair sets in, Nehemiah wants God to act to prevent it. It is a prayer that God will come down *now*, at this very moment, and demonstrate his sovereignty over these enemies of the Jews.

Noteworthy characteristics of Nehemiah’s Prayers

It is a prayer for God to side with the Jews. By insulting the people of the Lord, the bullies insult the Lord himself. Nehemiah has no doubt at all that this project is the Lord’s purpose and that therefore his glory is at stake.

It is an imprecatory prayer asking for God to judge his enemies: “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” (Neh. 4:4–5).

This is a prayer for justice in a situation that is sinful. Modernity's ambivalent response to morality finds such prayers vengeful rather than righteous, and few of us can hear prayers calling for judgment on God's enemies without cringing at the self-righteousness that we perceive them as assuming. The key principle here is stated in Psalm 139:21–22: "Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord . . .? I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies." The nearer we come to this state of mind, which is a spinoff from the desire that God's will be done, his kingdom come, and his name be hallowed and glorified, the less problem shall we have with vengeance prayers.⁴

This is not a prayer for personal vengeance; it is a prayer for God to do something. Nehemiah is not in a position to offer a military solution as such (though it would be an ethically acceptable response), and therefore he asks God to deal with them. If we have problems with the idea of God's taking vengeance on his enemies, we have adopted a view of God that the Bible knows nothing about. Our problem, then, is with the Bible itself.

DETERMINED RESOLVE

The response 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*" (Neh. 4:6). To open the attack with a barrage of words was worth trying. It is the enemy's oldest weapon, and in the form of ridicule it needs no factual ammunition, not even argument. *On this occasion the morale which is attacked was too well-founded to be undermined. The words stung; but they produced not a quiver of indecision: only indignation.*⁵

The psychological pressure, though real and powerful, came to nothing because the Lord intervened, So far, then, success—because the Lord heard the prayers of his people and gave them strength to do his will.

"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" (Neh. 4:10).

The Jews' enemies are now saying, "*They will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work*" (Neh. 4:11). How could anybody sleep at night with the fear that he might wake to find armed, murderous thugs in his bedroom, ready to slit his throat!

Nehemiah's response

"And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night" (Neh. 4:9). Prayer to God *and* preparation for battle. Nehemiah posted guards day and night and, when things got decidedly worse, stopped the work (v. 13), armed the people, and arranged them at the most exposed places along the wall (v. 13), urging them not to be afraid, but to "remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for . . . brothers, . . . sons, . . . daughters, . . . wives, and . . . homes" (v. 14).

What are the lessons?

1. Satan always opposes a good thing no matter what it is.

The Bible does not paint for us a picture of this life as idealistic and trouble-free; that must wait for heaven. In this world, sin-ravaged as it is, where Satan prowls like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour, we must expect trouble. Passages such as this one are given to us by way of example so that we might be forewarned (cf. 1 Cor. 10:11).

2. The importance and value of prayer.

Not only Nehemiah, whom we have come to expect to engage in prayer at a moment's notice, but the entire community resorted to prayer in the face of impending trouble. Our ability to make decisions about what is best for us is often formulated by less-than-pure motives, and we are prone to be selfish in asking for God to intervene in our particular situation. God's answers help us to refocus, and sometimes they are directed to teach us that what we asked was not, in fact, the best thing at all.⁶ **Trouble did not disappear for this community (as we will see in our next study), and prayers, which may well have begun with a demand that the trouble be taken away, soon turned to requests for tenacity and strength to fight.**

3. Pray first and commit your cause to God. Pray first and then take the steps that seem appropriate for the need at hand. Pray first and be sure that the steps you take are ones formed by the guiding hand of God. Pray first and keep from panicking when the smell of battle is upon you.

4. **Know that there is always a reality of spiritual opposition beforehand as we "run . . . the race that is set before us"** (Heb. 12:1) will help us avoid becoming too discouraged or drawing false conclusions—thinking that opposition signals God's disapproval of us and that we should change course immediately.

¹The NIV translation of Nehemiah 4:2 is employed here.

²See J. I. Packer, *A Passion for Faithfulness: Wisdom from the Book of Nehemiah* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1995), 99–100.

³Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 91.

⁴Packer, *A Passion for Faithfulness*, 101–2.

⁵Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 90.

⁶Thomas, D. W. H. (2016). *Ezra & Nehemiah*. (R. D. Phillips, P. G. Ryken, & I. M. Duguid, Eds.) (pp. 248–258). Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing.