

A Study of the Book of Nehemiah

Living in the Midst of Opposition & Discouragement (*Nehemiah 4:1-23*)

“Pray as if everything depended on God, then preach as if everything depended on you.”
~ Charles Spurgeon

I. Overview

In reading chapter 3, we assume that the rebuilding of the walls and gates of Jerusalem went without a glitch. However, Nehemiah 4 quickly reveals that the arduous task of rebuilding the walls was met with great opposition. This adversity led to discouragement and threatened the successful completion of the construction project. Despite the criticism, discouragement, and adversity, Nehemiah and the Israelites persevered as they looked to the Lord.

II. Living in the Midst of Opposition (4:1-23)

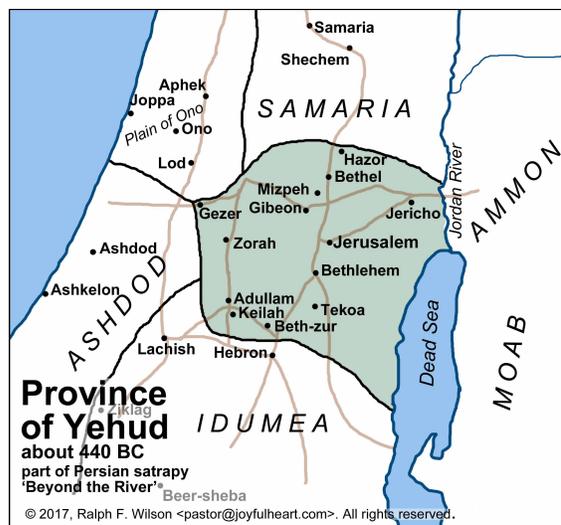
This chapter can be divided into three sections. Each of these portions contain both a problem and a solution. Observe the following:

A. Facing Criticism (vv. 1-6).

Problem: Nehemiah and his building crew encounter disparaging words and ridicule.

vv. 1-3 - Politically and economically, Sanballat and Tobiah could not afford for Jerusalem to be rebuilt. This ancient Jewish capital was strategically located in the region. However, there was an element of truth in the scornful words of Sanballat and Tobiah. Archaeological excavations reveal that these walls were inferior to previous fortifications (e.g., Hezekiah's).

Sanballat's "scorn is voiced not merely in the hearing of the wall-builders, but in the presence of his allies; it is his way of boosting morale among his own people now that he sees that the threat is taking on serious proportions" (Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 216).



v. 2 "again offer sacrifice" - Often translated "restore," the idea behind the Hebrew suggests Sanballat is asking "are these fanatics going to pray that the stones fall into place?!"

Ironically, Tobiah means "Yahweh is good." Though an Ammonite official, Tobiah had married into an influential Jewish family. Later, Nehemiah informs the reader that the son of the high priest had married Sanballat's daughter (6:17-19). Both Tobiah and Sanballat had connections with prominent residents of Jerusalem!

Solution: The Israelites call to the Lord.

vv. 4-5 - Before noting what Nehemiah says and to whom, observe what Nehemiah does *not* say and to whom does he *not* address?

This prayer to the Lord contains two requests: (1) for the Lord to help His servants: and (2) for the Lord to judge His enemies. Observe that Nehemiah's curse is a declaration of God's opposition to those who seek to thwart God's will (see Psalm 123; 139:21-22; Jer 18:23). Sadly, Sanballat and Tobiah could have repented and joined other regional leaders in assisting Nehemiah. They refused.

How do we reconcile Nehemiah's prayer with Jesus' command to love our enemies and pray for them (see Lk 6:27-28)?

v. 6 - Despite Sanballat's and Tobiah's desire to foster insecurity, self-doubt, and fear of failure, the Israelites did not despair or become paralyzed by hopelessness.

B. Facing Discouragement (vv. 7-14).

Problem: Nehemiah and his building crew encounter discouragement and even hopelessness among the people.

vv. 7-8 - The number of enemies is growing. With opposition from Ashdod, the residents of Jerusalem are now surrounded on all sides (see map on page 1). While it was unlikely they would attack in full force due to a fear of imposing upon Artaxerxes' decree, they most likely resorted to guerrilla warfare in order to sabotage the work on the Jerusalem walls.

v. 9 - Nehemiah's leadership model was contagious. Just as Nehemiah looked to the Lord in his time of trouble, the people commit the situation to the Lord in prayer.

v. 10 - The Israelites are paralyzed by the criticism, and they doubt their ability to complete the task. "The temptation to unbelief must have been immense. Those especially who did not even live in Jerusalem, and may have worried about the security of their own towns, may have wondered whether their present task was just the fanaticism of a misguided idealist" (McConville, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, 92).

vv. 10-12 - The situation is dire. Whether or not a surprise attack was simply a rumor, the threat was real. The Israelites had lost their strength, their vision, their confidence, and their security.

Solution: The Israelites remember the Lord's character and past actions.

v. 13 - Nehemiah strategically protects the places where the walls are vulnerable. He also places family units together for protection and to ensure there is no desertion.

v. 14 - "Remembering the Lord" - Not only does Nehemiah strategically reconfigure the workers, he also rallies the "troops" by recalling tradition. What events do you think Nehemiah was asking the people of God to recall?

As it has been said, one with God is a majority. "During times of discouragement, it's important for all of us to refocus our attention on the Lord. We can do this by meditating on His promises, memorizing His word, and reflecting on His character" (Swindoll, *Hand Me Another Brick*, p. 43, fn. 3).

C. Facing Adversity (vv. 15-23).

Problem: Nehemiah and his building crew encounter a daunting and grueling task.

v. 15 - "frustrated their plan" - Throughout Israel's history, the Lord often creates confusion and despair for their enemy (see Exod 15:14-16; 23:27-28; Deut 2:25).

vv. 16-18a - To complicate matters, the Israelites not only need to continue building, they would need to be in a state of constant readiness for battle.

Solution: Nehemiah perseveres as he rests in the Lord.

vv. 18b-20 - "trumpeter" - The trumpet blast was often seen as the signal for holy war (see Judg 3:27; 6:34; 7:18; 1 Sam 13:3).

"our God will fight for us" - The verbiage is identical to previous Old Testament accounts (see Exod 14:14; Josh 10:14). One wonders if the people were reflecting on Psalm 127:1: "Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain."

vv. 21-23 - Nehemiah publicly notes to the people his dependence on the Lord. He also sets an example of perseverance and vigilance in completing the Lord's work.

III. Intersect

A. If you are identifying with Christ and His work, you will be persecuted.

Matthew 5:11-12; also, see 2 Timothy 3:12 -

B. We must not forget that we are in a spiritual battle. As reminded by J. I. Packer, “We who are Christ’s should detest Satan but not dread him, since God now provides us with all-purpose combat equipment for use against him” (*A Passion for Faithfulness*, 95).

Ephesians 6:10-18 -

C. In the midst of life’s trials and adversity, look first to the Lord. Our first response to opposition should be prayer.

Psalm 27:1-4, 11, 14 -

For further thought . . .

Based upon our study this morning, you may want to spend some additional time this week interacting with the following:

Is there an area of your life that is creating feelings of uncertainty, inferiority, and insecurity? Take some time to examine these texts on perseverance:

- Luke 8:15
- 1 Timothy 4:16
- Hebrews 10:35-36; 12:1-3
- James 1:3-4, 12; 5:11

After examining these texts, spend some time in prayer concerning this area of your life where you are facing opposition. Ask the Lord to help you view this adversity as an opportunity to learn and grow.

“Attempt great things for God—expect great things from God.” ~ William Carey