

Nehemiah

Chapter 4

Opposition to the Work

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?” 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!” 4 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. 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. 7 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. 9 And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night. 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.” 11 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.” 13 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. 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.”

4:2 *he said.* Disputes between rival Persian governors were frequent. Sanballat asked several derisive questions to taunt the Jews and to discourage them in their efforts. (CSB)

Whenever God’s work is being done Satan works overtime to create opposition. (PBC)

Army. Militia that Sanballat probably commanded. (TLSB)

Samaria. C 40 mi N of Jerusalem; former capital of Northern Kingdom and now the Persian administrative center. (TLSB)

Sanballat’s ridicule took the form of five rhetorical questions. (CC)

what are those feeble Jews doing? – The *first* characterized the Judeans as “pathetic,” a word that signifies frailty and lack of sufficient strength. This implies that the Judeans had undertaken a task that was well beyond their ability to complete. (CC)

will they restore their wall? –The *second* question, though somewhat obscure, seems to build on the first one by asking whether the Judeans could complete the work by themselves, without the aid of others, such as those who were now jeering them. (CC)

will they offer sacrifices? – The *third* question then asks whether the Judeans would offer sacrifices to their God, seeking to appease Him and solicit aid from Him. This is an indirect way of mocking God Himself: it implies that the Judeans’ God would lack the power to help them complete the project. This retort is directed against the faith in God that Nehemiah had expressed to Sanballat and Tobiah earlier: “The God of heaven will make us successful. We His servants will arise and rebuild” (2:20). (CC)

will they finish in a day? – The *fourth* question seems to doubt the determination of the Judeans. It apparently implies that the only hope of the Judeans was to complete the project in one day; if they failed to finish after one day, the Judeans would simply give up since they would realize that completing it was beyond their capabilities. (CC)

can they bring the stone back to life from these heaps of rubble...burned as they are? – Finally, the *fifth* question is framed almost as if the Judeans would have to resurrect the stones to bring the wall back to life. It asks where the Judeans would get the proper building materials, since the stones of the original wall had been burned by the Babylonians when they destroyed it in 587 BC. This implies that burned stones would be unsuitable for building because the heat would have weakened the limestone blocks. This description probably is an exaggeration, since only parts of the city wall would have been directly affected by the fires set when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem. Instead of trying to burn the stone wall, the Babylonians would have battered and toppled it. (CC)

burned. Fire had damaged the stones, which were probably limestone, and had caused many of them to crack and crumble. (CSB)

Sanballat inferred that it would take a miracle for the Judeans to achieve their goal of rebuilding the walls. (TLSB)

4:3 fox. See Jdg 15:4; SS 2:15. The Hebrew for this word may also mean “jackal” (Ps 63:10; La 5:18; Eze 13:4). The jackal normally hunts in packs, whereas the fox is usually a nocturnal and solitary animal. (CSB)

Tobiah, one of Sanballat’s allies, added his ridicule by stating that even a relatively small animal like a fox would be able to cause the wall built by the Judeans to collapse. Foxes often inhabited ruins (Ezek. 13:4; Lam. 5:18), and so Tobiah was implying that the wall of Jerusalem would remain in ruins. (CC)

Such scorn was nothing new, and it is still around today. Throughout history unbelievers have scoffed at the humble means God uses to fulfill his promises. It was that way in Abraham’s family. Ishmael scoffed at little Isaac as the bearer of the promise (Gen 22:8-14). Goliath cursed David and the God in whose name he came (1 Sam 17). Christ himself endured scorn throughout his life because he came in lowliness. Today the unbelieving world still heaps scorn on God’s Word and the quiet way it works. Many demand that the church perform the sign of the reforming society; they deride the fact that the church cannot even eliminate sin in the lives of its own members, much less society as a whole. But God’s faithful servants ignore the scorn and stick to the job God has given them. In this way God’s work is done, the gospel continues its quiet march, and God’s kingdom advances forcefully. (PBC)

4:4-5 As in the so-called imprecatory psalms (Ps 79:12; 83; 94:1-3; 109:14; 137:7-9), Nehemiah does not himself take action against his opponents but calls down on them redress from God. In v. 5 Nehemiah's prayer echoes the language of Jer. 18:23. (CSB)

Nehemiah's prayer put the ridicule of the adversaries into sharp contrast with his trust in God. Opposition to work enjoined by God is defiance of His will and comes under His curse. People of strong faith ask God to break and hinder "every evil plan and purpose of the devil, the world, and our sinful nature, which do not want to hallow God's name or let His kingdom come." (TLSB)

This is the first of several short prayers by Nehemiah that he recorded in his memoirs. Although Nehemiah was often a man of action, his prayer eschews any action by the Judeans to take revenge. Instead he calls on God alone to take action as God sees fit. In this he was following in the tradition of the prayers of Jeremiah and the imprecatory psalms. (CC)

The God who promises forgiveness in the gospel is the same God who threatens in his law to punish all who despise him. Those who despise God's promise and work oppose his plans remain under the wrath of God. We cannot wish such people success without setting ourselves against the will of God. Today we should pray that our enemies and God's enemies will come to repentance. But we must also pray that their attacks on God's kingdom come to nothing. Martin Luther once wrote, "We cannot pray the Lord's Prayer without cursing." Every time we pray, "Hallowed be thy name, Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done." We are in a sense cursing. As Luther writes in his explanation of the Third Petition of the Lord's Prayer: "God's will is done when he breaks and defeats every evil plan and purpose of the devil, the world and our sinful flesh, which try to prevent us from keeping God's name holy and letting his kingdom come." (PBC)

A leader must have an infectious optimism, and the determination to persevere in the face of difficulties. He must radiate confidence, relying on moral and spiritual principles and resources to work our rightly even when he himself is not too certain of the material outcome. (Nehemiah and the Dynamics of Effective Leadership – p. 64)

4:4 *hear O our God* – It is most instructive for us to notice that Nehemiah first brings the whole matter before the Lord. (Nehemiah and the Dynamics of Effective Leadership – pp. 61)

The secret of overcoming opposition lies in our relationship with the Lord. Negative feelings destroy our confidence. They can be successfully counteracted only but faith. Anxiety never robs tomorrow of its sorrow, it only saps today of its strength. Nehemiah's perseverance was established firmly upon the conviction that what he was doing was what God wanted done. (Nehemiah and the Dynamics of Effective Leadership – p. 65)

4:6 The taunts of the enemies (vv. 2-3) did not stop work on the wall as segments were linked together to form an unbroken circuit around the city. (TLSB)

to half its height. Full height of finished wall is not reported.

Nehemiah reports that the work on the wall was half finished before the opponents took further action. This in itself was an answer to Nehemiah's prayer, since instead of the Judean's failing, God turned the ridicule of Sanballat and Tobiah into an embarrassing failure. (CC)

The wisdom of Nehemiah's leadership was that he inspired the people to place their trust in God. He did not point to his own abilities, but consistently spoke of God's work (e.g., 2:18, 20). If his short prayer in response to the ridicule (vv. 4-5) of Sanballat and Tobiah was spoken publicly as a response, which would be appropriate given the public ridicule, the Nehemiah also demonstrated public leadership that focused the people's attention on God. (CC)

True godly leadership among God's people is ministerial service that teaches them to rely on God and find their strength and joy in Him (1 Peter 5:1-4). This is what is shown by the builders' completion of the wall to half its height. God gave them strength and determination as they relied on His promises in the face of human insults and ridicule. In a much greater way, the Messiah, the Son of God, relied on strength given Him by His Father to endure mocking, ridicule, and suffering even to the point of death, and the Father vindicated Him by raising Him from the dead (see e.g., Is. 50:2-10; 53:11-12; Psalms 2; 22:4-24; 110; Phil. 2:5-11). (CC)

“When He Himself was reviled, He did not revile back; while suffering, He did not threaten, but continually entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly” (1 Peter 2:23).

4:7 *Sanballat, Tobiah,...Arabs* – To this point the opposition had not had any significant success in stopping the building of Jerusalem's wall. Therefore, the enemies formed a grand coalition that surrounded Judea. Sanballat was the power to the north in Samaria; Tobiah and the Ammonites were to the east; the Arabs were to the south (and were led by Geshem, although he is not mentioned); and Ashdod was to the west. (CC)

Ashdodites. It became a district capital under Persian rule. (CSB)

The Ashdodites were inhabitants of Philistine city of Ashdod, 35 miles west of Jerusalem. (TLSB)

4:8 *they all plotted together* – Everything seemed to be in the enemies' favor. Judah was surrounded by enemies on all side – the Samaritans on the north, the Ammonites across the Jordan to the east, the Arabs on the south, and Ashdod, a city of the Philistines, joined the coalition on the west. (PBC)

Their conspiracy was to attack the Judeans and bring the work to a halt. Nehemiah does not tell the reader how he found out about the conspiracy. (CC)

come and fight – Likely by guerrilla attacks. They hardly would have risked open warfare in defiance of “the king's letters” (2:9). (TLSB)

The desperation of Sanballat and his allies is shown by their willingness to risk reprisal by Artaxerxes, who had authorized the rebuilding of Jerusalem's wall. Had their plans actually come to fruition, they would have violated the decree of King Artaxerxes. Perhaps they thought they could plead that they had launched a military intervention to stop Nehemiah and the Judeans from rebelling (see 2:19; 6:6; cf. Ezra 4:11-16). Or they may have gambled that once they stopped the building process, the Persians would accept the situation, despite Artaxerxes' authorization, simply to keep peace in the volatile western reaches of the empire. Whatever their calculus, it is clear that they were increasingly alarmed by the success of the building project. Their anger (4:7) made them willing to take drastic and risky actions to prevent the wall's completion. (CC)

4:9 *prayed ... set a guard.* Prayer and watchfulness blend faith and action, and also emphasize both the divine side and the human side. (CSB)

This is an illustration of a Latin proverb *ora et labora* (“pray and work”). (TLSB)

He shows that prayer is not a substitute for action. (Nehemiah and the Dynamics of Effective Leadership – p. 69)

This guard apparently came from Jerusalem, perhaps from the citadel (7:2), since its members already had weapons (4:13). At this time Nehemiah does not mention any need to arm the workers themselves (as he will do later in 4:16-23. More importantly, Nehemiah did not trust in military power (see Is. 31:1; Ps. 20:7), but in God, and so his first response to the threat was to pray. (CC)

Strength is gained by overcoming adversity, not by giving in to it. When a difficult situation arose he faced it objectively. He was sensitive to the needs of those within Jerusalem as well as to the plots and schemes of those without. (Nehemiah and the Dynamics of Effective Leadership – pp. 67, 73)

4:10-11 Strength of the workers was spent, and fear of enemy attacks nearly paralyzed them. (TLSB)

4:10 *In Judah it was said.* Or, “people of Judah said.” (TLSB)

strength...failing. The picture is of a worker staggering under the weight of his load and ready to fall at any step. (CSB)

The posting of a Judean guard did have a detrimental psychological effect on the Judean builders. The presence of the guard constantly reminded the workers that Sanballat and his associates were threatening to attack. The builders realized how hazardous their work was. The constant threat of imminent attack made the completion of the project less certain; the work seems harder, and the danger appeared insurmountable. The taunting words of Sanballat and Tobiah (4:1-3) had instilled doubts in the minds of the workers. (CC)

All Christians have experienced similar psychological attacks and spiritual warfare by the world, Satan, and their own sinful human desires. These assaults distract believers and draw their attention away from God and His strength, through which they can approach all of the tasks that they are called to do (Phil. 4:11-13). Like Peter, who plunged beneath the waves when he was distracted by the storm (Mt. 14:27-31), the Judeans were in danger of failing because they looked not to the promise of the coming Christ nor compared the threats to the power of their Lord, but instead compared the dangers posed by the enemy with their own meager strength. (CC)

4:11 *our enemies said.* Either Nehemiah had friendly informants, or the enemy was spreading unsettling rumors. (CSB)

Adding to the tension was the adversaries’ scheme to attack the Judeans when they least expected it and too quickly to allow them time to respond, so that they could kill the builders. Since Nehemiah could quote their words, it is likely that once Sanballat’s forces saw that Nehemiah had posted a guard, they deliberately allowed this scheme to leak out as a rumor. (CC)

4:12 *Jews who lived near them* – These menacing words were probably delivered by “the Judeans who lived near” the enemies. The enemies probably persuaded them to urge the builders to abandon the rebuilding of the city wall. The Judeans from outlying areas were the most vulnerable to pressure from the hostile neighbors of Judea and therefore, were most likely to view abandonment of the project as the wisest course of action. (CC)

Builders who came from nearby towns. (TLSB)

The key to Nehemiah’s successful handling of this crisis lies in his ability accurately to diagnose what is wrong. We must be in touch with those with whom we work. This is the only way we can counteract negative influence. We must be visible. And with visibility must come accessibility. (Nehemiah and the Dynamics of Effective Leadership – pp. 70-71)

ten times over. Many times. (CSB)

You must return to us. Because of the danger to their lives. (TLSB)

4:13 STATIONED – Nehemiah placed guards in walled areas, but near breaches in the walls (cf. v. 7), to prevent enemies from entering the city. (TLSB)

lowest points ... open places. Nehemiah posted men conspicuously in the areas that were the most vulnerable along the wall. (CSB)

These were open places that had been cleared of rubble. (TLSB)

by their clans – Clans or family groups. (TLSB)

spears. Used as thrusting weapons (Nu 25:7–8; 1Ki 18:28). (CSB)

Nehemiah found an effective way to reverse the declining morale of the builders. Instead of allowing them simply to fear the enemy, he armed them against the enemy. By equipping them to be active participants in the warfare, Nehemiah was boosting their morale and signaling to them that they could indeed complete the project. (CC)

When a difficult situation arose he faced it objectively. He was sensitive to the needs of those within Jerusalem as well as the plots and schemes of those without. (Nehemiah and the Dynamics of Effective Leadership – p. 73)

4:14 *Don’t be afraid of them. Remember the Lord.* The best way to dispel fear is to remember the Lord, who alone is to be feared (see Dt 3:22; 20:3; 31:6). (CSB)

Nehemiah encouraged his work crew to fight hard, knowing that the powerful Lord was with them. (TLSB)

Nehemiah also armed the people with the Word of God. His opening words to the leaders and the people were “do not be afraid.” This same exhortation was spoken by God Himself as He issued His Gospel promises to the patriarchs (Gen. 15:1; 26:24; 46:3). God’s spokesman Moses repeatedly told Israel, “Do not be afraid” (Ex. 14:13; Num. 14:9; Deut. 1:21; 20:3; 31:6) because Yahweh would save His people from the Egyptians and defeat the Canaanites, whose land His people would conquer. Nehemiah’s words in this verse are especially based on God’s words of Deuteronomy 7. Moses told Israel, “Do not be afraid,” (Deut. 7:18), of the military superior

Canaanites, although He acknowledged that they were indeed “afraid” (Deut. 7:19). Then He said: (CC)

“Do not be terrified before them, for Yahweh your God is in your midst, a great and fearsome God.” (Deut. 7:21)

The Hebrew verb in the exhortation translated as “do not be terrified” (Deut. 7:21) is nearly synonymous to the one “do not be afraid” in this verse. Whereas Moses used God’s personal name “Yahweh,” Nehemiah deferentially called Him “the Lord,” which later in Judaism became the regular substitute when reading aloud the ineffable name. (CC)

Nehemiah just like Moses in Deut. 7:21, pointed the timid people to God’s omnipotence, righteousness, and holiness: He is “great and fearsome.” This description points to God’s power to strike fear in His heathen enemies, thereby relieving the fear of His own people. Nehemiah had used the same pair of adjectives, “the great and fearsome God,” to address God in his prayer in 1:5. These two are also part of the threefold description of God as “great, mighty, and fearsome” in the prayer of the Levites (9:32), which draws upon Deut. 10:17. The Judeans’ morale began to sag when they focused more on their troubles than on their God. Nehemiah wisely called on them to look to God’s ability to terrify the enemy and defend His people, whom He Himself had already redeemed. (CC)

Nehemiah followed these words with a call for the builders to fight for their families and homes in this verse. Through their newly configured vocation of armed builders, they themselves would be the instruments through which God would defend them. Since Nehemiah had arranged the builders by clans (4:13, they would be especially conscious of fighting for their families as they worked and bore arms together. (CC)

4:1–14 The weary and wary Judeans support one another with the counsel of Nehemiah. Today, do not let the taunts of unbelievers or naysayers keep you from fulfilling your calling. The great and powerful Lord—He who stooped to bear our burdens and save us in Christ—is with you in your work. • Great and awesome Lord, I remember and praise Your good works. Work on my behalf, O Lord, that I may fulfill Your purpose for me. Amen. (TLSB)

The Work Resumes

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. 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. 19 And I said to the nobles and to the officials and to neither I nor my brothers nor my servants nor the men of the guard who followed me, none of us took off 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.” 21 So we labored at the work, and half of them held the spears from the break of dawn until the stars came out. 22 So 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.” 23 Off our clothes; each kept his weapon at his right hand.

4:16 *my servants* – These were probably Nehemiah’s personal servants who formed a kind of militia (v. 21; 5:15-16). (TLSB)

By using his own men, Nehemiah was demonstrating that he was leading the way in supporting the rebuilding of the wall. He was not a governor who expected the people to do the work of his bidding without any sacrifice on his part. He did not argue that he could not spare his men. Instead he embodied Jesus’ teaching that one who wants to be greatest must be servant of all (Mt. 20:26; Mk. 10:43; John 13:12-17). Christ himself took on the form of a slave, even to death on the cross (Phil. 2:5-11). (CC)

shields. Made primarily of wood or wickerwork and therefore combustible (Eze 39:9). (CSB)

mail. The Hebrew for this word designated primarily a breastplate of metal or a coat of mail (see 2Ch 18:33). (CSB)

4:17 *work with one hand ... weapon in the other*. Means either that the workers carried their materials with one hand and their weapons with the other, or simply that the weapons were kept close at hand. (CSB)

Those carting away rubble also carried weapons. (TLSB)

4:18 *had his sword* – This was a short sword, which we might regard as a long knife, that would not impede the work. (TLSB)

trumpet. Bugler stood beside Nehemiah, ready to rally reinforcement to the point of attack (v. 20). (TLSB)

Knowing that the attack could come from any direction, Nehemiah arranged for a trumpeter to give a signal so that the scattered Judeans could join forces to repel the enemy. (CC)

4:20 *Our God will fight for us!* For the concept of holy war, in which God fights for his people, see Jos 10:14, 42; Jdg 4:14; 20:35; 2Sa 5:24: The Conquest and the Ethical Question of War. (CSB)

4:21 *half of them*. Refers to Nehemiah’s servants (v 16). (TLSB)

until the stars came out. Indicates the earnestness of their efforts, since the usual time to stop working was at sunset (Dt 24:15; Mt 20:8). (CSB)

Nehemiah reports that the workers put in extra hours, working from the early light of dawn past twilight, until the stars shone and it would be too dark to work. (CC)

4:22 *within Jerusalem* – To make working late possible Nehemiah urged the builders to stay in the city so that their commute would be brief. (CC)

Nonresidents (cf v 12) capable of bearing arms were ordered to stay overnight in Jerusalem rather than going to their own homes. (TLSB)

guard for us by night. Even men from outside Jerusalem stayed in the city at night so that some of them could serve as sentries. (CSB)

Their staying within Jerusalem enabled them to guard each other from any nocturnal attack, instead of leaving Jerusalem vulnerable if they had returned to their various villages. (CC)

4:23 *none ... took off our clothes.* To bathe or rest. (TLSB)

weapon at his right hand. Nehemiah and his close companions set an example of vigilance. (TLSB)

Although the precise meaning of the end of the verse is not clear, the implication is that constant preparedness was the rule. According to Josephus (*Antiquities*, 11.5.8), Nehemiah “himself made the rounds of the city by night, never tiring either through work or lack of food and sleep, neither of which he took for pleasure but as a necessity.” (CSB)

Finally, Nehemiah and his administration once again led by example. They were ready at all times. Despite the grime from the labor, they did not even change their clothes, and they always carried a weapon in hand. Likewise, Christians are to remain armed and vigilant in their spiritual warfare (Rom., 13:12; 2 Cor. 6:7; 10:4; Eph. 6:10-18; cf. Heb. 4:12; Rev. 19:15). (CC)

In the same way that Nehemiah’s faith linked him to the Source of strength, his faith became the ground of his confidence. It gave him the courage to persevere. (Nehemiah and the Dynamics of Effective Leadership – p. 74)

4:15–23 Nehemiah encourages ever more vigilant service by reminding the workers that “our God will fight for us.” Whether the struggle is physical, mental, or spiritual, the Lord rallies to our side. Enact every sound plan with confidence in His blessing. Just as He overcame Satan at the cross, He will overcome the obstacles you, too, may face. • Grant me full confidence in Your will, O Lord, that I may take the battle to my enemies with boldness. Amen. (TLSB)