

Nehemiah Chapter 4

Verses 1-23

This section describes the intimidation and opposition to the project.

Verses 1-6

People like “Sanballat” will always be indignant when God’s work begins.

Yet Nehemiah and the people directed their attention to God, and then they returned to work after praying.

Christians must not let the derision of the enemy distract them.

Nehemiah 4:1 "But it came to pass, that when Sanballat heard that we builded the wall, he was wroth, and took great indignation, and mocked the Jews."

Or were building it; for as yet it was not finished (see Neh. 4:6).

"He was wroth, and took great indignation":

Inwardly, though outwardly he pretended to treat the work with contempt, as if it never would be accomplished, which yet he feared.

"And mocked the Jews":

As a set of foolish builders, and unable to finish what they had begun.

This was the troublemaker we read about earlier.

He did not want Jerusalem with this wall of protection.

He had even accused Nehemiah of wanting to revolt against the king.

They were actually mocking the Jews for taking on so large a task by so few people.

Nehemiah 4:2 "And he spake before his brethren and the army of Samaria, and said, What do these feeble Jews? will they fortify themselves? will they sacrifice? will they make an end in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of the rubbish which are burned?"

“The army of Samaria”:

While it is a possibility that his intentions were to provoke the Samaritans to action, which would have brought the Persian overlord down on Samaria swiftly; harassment and mockery (verse 3), became the primary strategy to prevent the reconstruction of the walls.

The broken walls of Jerusalem did not consist of large blocks of stone that had been toppled by Babylonian invaders.

The “stones” had been “burned” by fire and broke down by the intense heat, making much of the old stone too fragile to use again.

Sanballat used five questions; some of them were subtly phrased to require a negative answer.

The audience could reach only one conclusion: these Jews were good for nothing.

Part of Nehemiah’s wall has now been found in recent excavations under the Jewish Quarter in Jerusalem.

The Samaritans had been enemies of Judah.

Most of it came from jealousy.

They felt the Jews were fortifying themselves against them.

He could not believe that so large a task could be accomplished by this fragment of Jews, that came back from Babylonian captivity.

He did not believe they would sacrifice their time and energy enough to get this job done.

He was not even aware that the king had given authority to Nehemiah to cut down trees in the forest for their building materials.

There is always someone saying the task the LORD has given you is an impossibility.

Sanballat had underestimated the power of God working through Nehemiah.

Nehemiah 4:3 "Now Tobiah the Ammonite [was] by him, and he said, Even that which they build, if a fox go up, he shall even break down their stone wall."

Who was one of his brethren he spake before (Neh. 4:2).

"And he said":

In the like contemptuous and scoffing manner.

"Even that which they build, if a fox go up, he shall even break down their stone wall":

Signifying not only that it was so low that a fox could easily get up to it, or leap over it; but that the materials were so bad, and the work so poorly done, that the weight of a fox would break it down.

Of which creatures many were thereabout, since Jerusalem was desolate (see Lam. 5:18).

The Ammonites had also, always been enemies of the people of Judah.

They were saying that the wall was built so weakly that just anything at all could tear it down.

It was pretty obvious that Tobiah was listening to Sanballat.

He was just agreeing with him, and trying to add something to show how weak the Jews were.

Nehemiah 4:4 "Hear, O our God; for we are despised: and turn their reproach upon their own head, and give them for a prey in the land of captivity:"

Here begins the prayer of Nehemiah, who had been informed of what these men said in contempt of him, and his builders.

And to whom he sent no answer, but applied to God.

"And turn their reproach upon their own head":

As they have despised and reproached us, let them be despised and reproached by their neighbors.

"Give them for a prey in the land of captivity":

Let them be carried captive, as we have been, and become a prey and booty to their enemies.

Nehemiah called out to God.

He brought it to the attention of God that these Ammonites and Samaritans were opposed to the work on the wall.

The thing that Nehemiah asked God for was for the hate to be turned again to them.

Actually, Nehemiah would be pleased if these people, who are trying to stop the work, would be taken captive themselves so the work could continue without harassment.

Verses 4-5

Nehemiah's dependence of his sovereign God is never more evident than in his prayer (compare 1:5-11; 2:4).

Nehemiah's prayer is like many of the Psalms (e.g., Psalm 123), and (Jer. 18:23), with a demand for retribution.

Nehemiah 4:5 "And cover not their iniquity, and let not their sin be blotted out from before thee: for they have provoked [thee] to anger before the builders."

"Cover not their iniquity":

Means let them not go unpunished (Psalms 85:2-3).

Nehemiah's harsh tone is due to the fact that God was being challenged.

Nehemiah was telling God that these enemies were not just the enemies of Judah, but they were God's enemies as well.

They were trying to stop God's work on the wall, but they were actually insulting the name of God in the process.

They were trying to cause the builders to lose confidence in the finishing of the wall.

Nehemiah 4:6 "So built we the wall; and all the wall was joined together unto the half thereof: for the people had a mind to work."

Went on in building it, notwithstanding their scoffs and threats.

"And all the wall was joined together unto the half thereof":

It was carried all-round the city to half the height of it.

"For the people had a mind to work":

Their heart was in it, they had a good will to it, and they made haste to finish it.

All of the insults and troublemaking these two evil men did, could not stop the work on the wall.

The entire wall was completed to half the height they had planned.

The people had it in their hearts to do this, and no insults could stop them.

Verses 7-9

The “Ashdodites” were a new group joining the alliance to bring a threat from the west.

They belonged to the Philistine race.

Israel’s enemies made plans to “fight against Jerusalem”, hoping to cause a delay.

Yet whenever God enlists people to do something for Him, He enables His work and equips His workers to complete the job.

Verses 7-8

“The Ashdodites”:

Added to the list of enemies already given are the dwellers of Ashdod, one of the former Philistine cities to the west of Jerusalem.

Apparently, they came to the point where they were at least contemplating a full-scale attack on Jerusalem because of the rapid progress of the wall.

Nehemiah 4:7 "But it came to pass, [that] when Sanballat, and Tobiah, and the Arabians, and the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites, heard that the walls of Jerusalem were made up, [and] that the breaches began to be stopped, then they were very wroth,"

Who were under and influenced by Geshem the Arabian.

"And the Ammonites":

Over whom Tobiah was governor.

"And the Ashdodites":

Who were of Ashdod or Azotus, one of the principalities of the Philistines, who were always enemies to the Jews.

"Heard that the walls of Jerusalem were made up":

Or "the length of them went up"; that is, the height of them.

That they rose up high apace, and were got up to, or almost completed to their proper height.

"And that the breaches began to be stopped":

For the walls were not all thrown down by the Chaldeans, but breaches made here and there, which were now repaired.

"Then they were very wroth":

And could not avoid showing it.

Before they mocked them, as attempting what they could not go through with.

But now, perceiving the work went on with great success, they were enraged.

All of these were the enemies of Jerusalem and Judah.

They knew that with the wall it would be much harder to overthrow Jerusalem.

Jealousy burned in their hearts that God had allowed the wall to be re-built.

Their anger was great against Jerusalem, and Nehemiah in particular.

Nehemiah 4:8 "And conspired all of them together to come [and] to fight against Jerusalem, and to hinder it."

All the above men and people entered into a confederacy and combination.

"To come and to fight against Jerusalem":

To bring an army with them, and by force cause the Jews to desist.

The Jews pretend they came to war, and brought with them an army of 180,000 men, which is not probable.

"And to hinder it":

The building of the walls of it; or "to make a wandering for him"; for Nehemiah, or the people, or both.

To, cause them to stray from their work, to frighten them from it, that they might become like men at their wits end, not knowing what to do, where to turn themselves, or what course to steer.

But to wander about as persons out of their senses; so Aben Ezra.

De Dieu joins this clause to the next verse, to cause every one of them to wander, we prayed, etc.

The Arabians, Ammonites, and Samaritans had decided they must stop these men of Judah now, before they built the other half of the wall.

They would even attack Jerusalem, if necessary to stop this wall.

Nehemiah 4:9 "Nevertheless we made our prayer unto our God, and set a watch against them day and night, because of them."

The Jews exhibited a balance between faith in God and readiness, employing some of the wall builders as guards.

“Prayer” does not eliminate the need to take practical measures, in this case to “set a watch” against the enemy (Psalm 50:15).

Faith and vigilance always go together.

When God’s people watch, they know how to pray (Col. 4:2).

The work was temporarily stopped to fight off their enemies, if they came.

Nehemiah prayed and asked God to help.

He also put men up and down the wall to warn of any attack.

Verses 10-15

External resistance often produces internal discouragement.

Yet one great lesson of Nehemiah’s story is that they would not stop the project to deal with the opposition.

Sometimes the work had to be reorganized, but he and “all” the people always “returned all of us to the wall”.

Nehemiah 4:10 "And Judah said, The strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed, and [there is] much rubbish; so that we are not able to build the wall."

“Much rubbish”:

Literally “dust”, the term refers to the rubble or ruins of the prior destruction (586 B.C.), which they had to clear away before they could make significant progress on the rebuilding of the walls.

The bearers of burdens had been reduced to a small number.

Most of them were set as guards on the wall, and they could not continue the work.

In this sense, the enemies had won for a time.

The work on the wall stopped.

Verses 11-12

Part of the strategy of the enemy coalition was to frighten and intimidate the Jews by making them think their army would soon surprise them with a massive force that would quickly engulf them.

Nehemiah 4:11 "And our adversaries said, They shall not know, neither see, till we come in the midst among them, and slay them, and cause the work to cease."

Our designs upon them.

"Neither see":

Or perceive what we are about to do.

"Till we come in the midst among them":

With an army suddenly, unaware and unexpected.

"And slay them":

They being unarmed, and not prepared to defend themselves.

"And cause the work to cease":

As it must in course, the builders being slain.

The enemy was still threatening to come in and kill all of those working on the wall.

Nehemiah 4:12 "And it came to pass, that when the Jews which dwelt by them came, they said unto us ten times, From all places whence ye shall return unto us [they will be upon you]."

Near Samaria, Arabia, and Ashdod, and had intelligence of their designs.

"Came, they said unto us ten times":

That is, they came to them at Jerusalem, and often told them, as this phrase "ten times" signifies (see notes on Gen. 31:7).

"From all places whence ye shall return unto us they will be upon you":

Come which way you will, so that ye are in the utmost danger.

Or "from all places"; where you are repairing and rebuilding.

"Return to us":

That ye may enjoy peace and prosperity with us under Sanballat, etc. and escape the wrath and fury you are now exposed to.

Or "from all places we come, that ye may return to us"; so De Dieu.

These Jews, though they pretended to be friends to their brethren, yet seemed to be in friendship with their enemies, and sought to discourage them, and weaken their minds, and cause them to cease building.

There were Jews who lived outside of the wall.

It seemed the people opposed to the building of the wall had told them, that they would not be strong enough to finish the building of the wall.

They threatened these people by telling them they had ten times as many as Judah, and Judah would not stand under such pressure.

Verses 13-15

"Set I in the lower places":

Nehemiah and the others had received word that Sanballat had mustered the army of Samaria (4:2).

In fact, God made sure the strategy was known by letting the nearby Jews know, so they would report it to Judah's leaders.

Though vigilant, armed, and ready, Nehemiah and those he led consistently gave God the glory for their victories and construction successes.

Nehemiah 4:13 "Therefore set I in the lower places behind the wall, [and] on the higher places, I even set the people after their families with their swords, their spears, and their bows."

Where the wall was lowest, and the enemy could more easily break it down, or get over it.

"And on the higher places":

Where the wall was higher; or rather on the towers upon the walls, as the word signifies the tops of rocks, which are dry and smooth (see Ezek. 24:2).

"I even set the people after their families":

According to their rank, number, strength, and valor.

"With their swords, their spears, and their bows":

With weapons they could use both near, and at a distance.

This warning from the adversaries caused Nehemiah to gather the people and place them on the wall, and behind the wall armed with sword, spears, and bows.

All of these threats were accomplishing the stopping of the work on the wall.

Verses 14-23

Nehemiah took quick and decisive action (verses 13-14), as he set armed individuals and exhorted them "be not ye afraid", but "remember the LORD" (Num. 14:9; Exodus 14:13-14).

He then made sure that half of his own bodyguard was always armed, and alerted each ruler to be ready to lead his group in case of attack (verse 16; the "habergeons" were breastplates, leather coats covered with thin plates of metal).

He then armed the laborers (verse 17), seeing that each builder had a sword at his side (verse 18), having a trumpeter always ready to sound the alarm (verse 18), and urging all who could possibly do so to remain in Jerusalem at night (verse 22).

Nehemiah took the lead by setting the example of preparedness (verse 23).

Nehemiah 4:14 "And I looked, and rose up, and said unto the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the people, Be not ye afraid of them: remember the Lord, [which is] great and terrible, and fight for your brethren, your sons, and your daughters, your wives, and your houses."

Took a view of the people, and observed that they were in their proper place, and sufficiently armed.

And also whether the enemy was coming.

"And rose up, and said unto the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the people":

Who were under their nobles and rulers, as their captains and commanders.

"Be not ye afraid of them":

Of their enemies, their numbers, and their threats.

"Remember the Lord, which is great and terrible":

Who is greater than they, and is to be feared and trusted in by his people, and is terrible even to the kings of the earth.

"And fight for your brethren, your sons, and your daughters, your wives, and your houses":

Intimating, that they were in danger of losing all that was near and dear, valuable and precious to them, if they did not fight for them.

And therefore, it became them to acquit themselves like men, and be strong.

Nehemiah had even found out the side the attack was supposed to come from.

He alerted the rulers of people of what was planned, and then he reminded them that they should not fear, because God would fight for them.

The wall would now help everyone, not just those who had been working on it.

Everyone must take up arms and fight off their mutual enemy.

Nehemiah 4:15 "And it came to pass, when our enemies heard that it was known unto us, and God had brought their counsel to nought, that we returned all of us to the wall, every one unto his work."

What they intended, as might be reported to them from the preparations made by the Jews to receive them, and defend themselves.

"And God had brought their counsel to naught":

Which was to come upon them secretly and unawares.

But being discovered, they dropped their design, and their scheme came to nothing.

"That we returned all of us to the wall, every one unto his work":

To that part of it where he made, in order to finish it.

When the enemy found that Nehemiah and all of Judah knew of their plans and were prepared to fight, the enemy decided not to fight them.

There seemed to be just a short pause for the preparation for war.

As soon as the threat was over, Nehemiah and all of the workers went back to work on the wall.

Verses 16-20

The people lived in a state of readiness to build or to fight, whichever was appropriate.

When the “trumpet” sounded, everyone would rush to lend aid.

To rally in times of trouble for mutual encouragement and support produced unity.

This is how the church should respond.

Verses 16 – 18a

The threats cut the work force in half, and even those who worked carried weapons in case of attack (compare verse 21).

Nehemiah 4:16 "And it came to pass from that time forth, [that] the half of my servants wrought in the work, and the other half of them held both the spears, the shields, and the bows, and the habergeons; and the rulers [were] behind all the house of Judah."

That they were thus alarmed of danger from their enemies.

"That the half of my servants wrought in the work":

Of building the wall.

His domestic servants, his guards, or mighty men, as Jarchi.

Men of war, the soldiers.

"And the other half of them held both the spears, the shields, and the bows":

Some offensive, others defensive weapons.

Some to fight with at a distance, others near at hand.

"And the habergeons":

Coats of mail, which they took and clothed themselves with.

"And the rulers were behind all the house of Judah":

The Jews that were working at the wall, to animate and encourage them, protect and defend them.

It seemed the threat of war had drawn all of the people together as one.

Half of the people worked on the wall, while the other half stood prepared for war.

All of those who had not been willing to work on the wall, were now standing ready to defend Jerusalem.

Nehemiah 4:17 "They which builded on the wall, and they that bare burdens, with those that laded, [every one] with one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other [hand] held a weapon."

That laid the mortar and stones upon it, and timber where it was necessary.

"And they that bare burdens":

That carried the mortar, stones, and timber to the builders, and served them.

"With those that laded":

Which prepared the above for them, and laid them on their shoulders.

"Every one with one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other hand held a weapon":

Which is not to be understood strictly and literally, for without both hands they could not well perform either of the above works.

But proverbially, signifying that they were intent on both working and fighting.

And were ready and prepared to do the latter, as well as the former.

Having weapons lying by them, or girt about them, as is explained in the following verse.

This is saying, that even those who were working on the wall, had a weapon ready beside them to use in case it was needed.

Verses 18b – 20

"Trumpet":

Among other functions, trumpets were used to sound an alarm in the event of danger or to summon soldiers to battle.

Nehemiah kept a trumpeter at his side always, so that the alarm could be sounded immediately.

His plan also included perpetual diligence (verses 22-23).

Nehemiah 4:18 "For the builders, every one had his sword girded by his side, and [so] builded. And he that sounded the trumpet [was] by me."

Thus, equipped he was prepared for either service.

"And he that sounded the trumpet was by me":

To give the alarm of war, that everyone might lay aside his work, and prepare for the battle.

This officer stood by Nehemiah, that when he found it necessary, might give him orders to sound his trumpet, for the men to gather to him.

This blowing of the trumpet in a certain area, would call the people to that area to fight.

Even though the threat of war remained, they built on the wall.

The men strapped their weapons to their sides and worked with their weapons where they could instantly get their hands on them.

If the trumpet blew, they would all stop working and prepare for war.

Nehemiah 4:19 "And I said unto the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the people, The work [is] great and large, and we are separated upon the wall, one far from another."

(See note on Neh. 4:14).

"The work is great and large":

The building of the wall all around the city of Jerusalem.

"And we are separated upon the wall, one far from another":

Some at work on one part of it, and some at another.

So that the distance between one another, at least in the further part, was very considerable.

Nehemiah 4:20 "In what place [therefore] ye hear the sound of the trumpet, resort ye thither unto us: our God shall fight for us."

Be it what part of the wall whatsoever they were at work, even the most distant.

"Resort ye thither unto us":

To Nehemiah, and the half of his servants armed, where the trumpet was blown.

That was to be the place of rendezvous.

"Our God shall fight for us":

And give us victory over our enemies.

None have any reason to be intimidated, when they shall hear the sound of the trumpet.

The wall went completely around the city with people every few feet working on building it up.

Those of Judah and Benjamin, who had come back from Babylon, were not a large number of people.

The blowing of the trumpet would be necessary to bring the greatest number together to fight, wherever the war broke out.

Nehemiah 4:21 "So we labored in the work: and half of them held the spears from the rising of the morning till the stars appeared."

Of building the wall.

And half of them held the spears; and other weapons before mentioned (Neh. 4:16).

"From the rising of the morning till the stars appeared":

That is, from morning to evening, the space of time the builders and laborers worked.

They were actually ready 24 hours a day, but they worked about a 12 hour shift from sunup to sundown.

Half were working, and half were standing guard at all times.

Nehemiah 4:22 "Likewise at the same time said I unto the people, Let every one with his servant lodge within Jerusalem, that in the night they may be a guard to us, and labor on the day."

That were at work upon the wall.

"Let everyone with his servant lodge within Jerusalem":

Every builder had a servant, or a lad, as the word signifies.

To wait upon him, to bring mortar or stone, or what he wanted.

And some of these builders, with their lads, came out of the country towns and villages in the morning, and returned at night.

Now Nehemiah proposed, for the safety of the city and its walls, that for the present they would lodge in Jerusalem.

"That in the night they may be a guard to us, and labor on the day":

Might help to protect them in the night, should they be surprised by the enemy, and be ready for their work in the daytime.

This was for the safety of Jerusalem, but it would also be safer for the workers to not leave the safety of the walls.

One or two men could easily be stopped and killed, when they were away from the others.

This way, they would all be together all the time.

Nehemiah 4:23 "So neither I, nor my brethren, nor my servants, nor the men of the guard which followed me, none of us put off our clothes, [saving that] every one put them off for washing."

The nobles and rulers.

"Nor my servants":

His domestic servants that waited upon him.

"Nor the men of the guard which followed me":

His bodyguard, which attended him as a commissioner of the king of Persia for state and grandeur.

"None of us put off our clothes":

At night when they laid themselves down to sleep, but laid in, them, that they might be ready upon an alarm made.

"Saving that everyone put them off for washing":

Not for common washing because dirty, but for washing on account of ceremonial uncleanness.

Which required washing both of bodies and garments (see Lev. 15:5), etc.

And the Vulgate Latin version expresses it by baptism, as the apostle calls such ceremonial ablutions in (Heb. 6:2).

It is in the margin of our Bibles, "everyone went with his weapon for water".

When he went to Siloam, or any other place, for water, he took a weapon with him to defend himself upon occasion; which is no bad sense of the words.

Noldius renders the words, "everyone with his weapon (and) water".

Both were at his bolster, ready, if needed (see 1 Sam. 26:11).

This is just saying, they slept in their clothes.

The only time they had their clothes off, was to wash them and put them right back on.

These had to be dedicated people to sacrifice like this to build the wall.

Notice that Nehemiah did this, as well as the men.

He set the example for them.

Nehemiah Chapter 4 Questions

1. Who was angry about them building the wall?
2. How were they mocking the Jews?
3. What description of the Jews did he use in verse 2?
4. What questions were they asking in a mocking way?
5. Why were the Samaritans upset about the wall?
6. There is always someone saying the task the LORD has given you to do is an _____.
7. How weak were they saying the wall was?
8. Tobiah was listening to _____.
9. The _____ and the _____ are opposed to the building of the wall.
10. What does Nehemiah ask God for?
11. Who were they provoking to anger, besides the workers?
12. In verse 6, we see that _____ of the wall is finished?

13. Who became angry, along with Tobiah and Sanballat, when they heard the Jews were building the wall?
14. What did they all conspire together to do?
15. What did Nehemiah do first?
16. What did they do, besides pray?
17. What hindered them from finishing the wall?
18. What were the adversaries threatening to do?
19. What did they tell the Jews, who lived out of Jerusalem?
20. What did Nehemiah do as a show of force?
21. What did Nehemiah say to the nobles?
22. As soon as the enemy had word of all they were doing to protect themselves, what did Nehemiah have his people do?
23. _____ of the men worked on the wall and _____ stood guard.
24. Those who worked on the wall had what weapons nearby to use, if necessary.
25. How would they bring the majority of the people to one area, if there was an attack?
26. How long were their workdays?
27. What did they do, when they slept?
28. This was for the safety of _____.
29. What did Nehemiah tell those who lived outside of the walls of Jerusalem to do?
30. _____ set the example for them.