



## Nehemiah - Chapter Four

### **II Nehemiah 3:1-7:4 - The Wall Is Built, Despite Difficulties (continues)**

#### Summary of Chapter Four

While the building continues, Sanballat and his allies resort to direct action in order to stop it, but their plot is foiled.

#### **II.b Nehemiah 4:1-23 - Hostile Plots Thwarted**

Refer to the chapter summary above.

<sup>1</sup> Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he mocked the Jews. <sup>2</sup> He said in the presence of his associates and of the army of Samaria, ‘What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore things? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish it in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish – and burnt ones at that?’ <sup>3</sup> Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, ‘That stone wall they are building – any fox going up on it would break it down!’

#### Nehemiah 4:1-3

Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged. Sanballat and Tobiah were first deeply disturbed when they heard that Nehemiah wanted to help the people of Jerusalem: <<*When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel*>> (Nehemiah 2:10). Then they used scorn and intimidation to prevent the work from starting: <<*But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they mocked and ridiculed us, saying, ‘What*

*is this that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?'*>> (Nehemiah 2:19). Now that the work had begun, they were furious and very indignant. Sanballat was enraged because of the challenge to his authority.

**Sanballat**. The name of a later Sanballat appears on a 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC papyrus from Wadi edh-Dhaliyeh, where fragmentary scrolls were found in a cave in the highlands near Samaria. In one of these scrolls a certain Sanballat administers the country.

**He mocked the Jews**. He is clearly worried by the Jews' actions, but expresses it in mockery, no doubt to encourage **his associates** to join him in resisting. The nature of their discouraging attack is evident. They used a mocking, sarcastic tone and **mocked the Jews, these feeble Jews**, with the repeated question '**will they?**' and even claiming that **any fox going up on it would break it down**: <<*Your maxims are proverbs of ashes, your defences are defences of clay*>> (Job 13:12).

**The army of Samaria**. It is not clear whether Sanballat really had the authority to command an army.

**Will they restore things?** Ironically, the answer to this and Sanballat's subsequent mocking questions will be a resounding 'yes'.

**Will they sacrifice** has the idea of, "Will they seek God through sacrifice and expect him to miraculously build the walls? Will they pray the walls up?"

**Will they finish it in a day** has the idea of "Do they have any idea what they are taking on? This is not an easy project."

Like most attacks of discouragement, there is a trace of truth in the words of the enemy. As builders, the **Jews** were **feeble**. They would not **finish it in a day**. They did not have the best materials to work with and few of them were skilled builders. A lying, discouraging attack will often have some truth in it, a tactic used from the beginning of time: <<*Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden"?'>> (Genesis 3:1), but it will neglect the great truth: God was with them and has promised to see them through.*

**Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish**. Rubbish here refers to the rubble, all that was left in the ruins of the broken and burnt walls of their once great city: <<*O God, the nations have come into your inheritance; they have defiled your holy temple; they have laid Jerusalem in ruins*>> (Psalm 79:1), and: <<*Micah of Moresheth, who prophesied during the days of King Hezekiah of Judah, said to all the people of Judah: "Thus says the Lord of hosts, Zion shall be ploughed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height"*>> (Jeremiah 26:18).

Discouragement is such a powerful weapon because it is the opposite of faith. Where faith believes in God, in his love and promises, discouragement looks for and believes the worst - and tends to pretty much forget about who God is and what he has promised to do.

Because Nehemiah and the workers did in fact have legal protection from the king, proven by the letters mentioned in Nehemiah 2:7, Sanballat and Tobiah had no authority to actually stop the work. All they could do was to discourage the Jews into stopping. The exact same attack comes into the life of the believer who is legally set free by his King. Yet they can be discouraged into drawing back from what God has set before them. People work differently under faith or under discouragement. They pray differently under faith or under discouragement. They read and hear the Word differently under faith or under discouragement. It is no wonder that Satan works so hard to keep people from faith in the Lord and keep them in discouragement: *<<but my righteous one will live by faith. My soul takes no pleasure in anyone who shrinks back.' But we are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but among those who have faith and so are saved>>* (Hebrews 10:38-39).

<sup>4</sup> Hear, O our God, for we are despised; turn their taunt back on their own heads, and give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. <sup>5</sup> Do not cover their guilt, and do not let their sin be blotted out from your sight; for they have hurled insults in the face of the builders.

#### Nehemiah 4:4-5

Hear, O our God, for we are despised. Nehemiah interjects in his own voice a prayer similar to certain prayers for deliverance from enemies in the Psalms, e.g. Psalm 74 and 79. He prays that what his enemies wish for him would return on their own heads; indeed, he prays that they would suffer captivity such as the Jews had recently experienced. The motive is not revenge but rather the honour of God, who is the real object of the enemies' insults and whose purposes they do not and cannot understand.

Do not cover their guilt. Nehemiah is asking that the Lord not overlook the sins of these people. He is not specifying punishment or calling for judgement, nor is he making a case for unforgiveness of sins, just that the Lord make a record of this in order to deal with it at the appropriate time: *<<And so people are humbled, and everyone is brought low – do not forgive them!>>* (Isaiah 2:9), and: *<<Let all their evildoing come before you; and deal with them as you have dealt with me because of all my transgressions; for my groans are many and my heart is faint>>* (Lamentations 1:22). The grace of God always leaves room for repentance and forgiveness of sins: *<<You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and*

*pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous>> (Matthew 5:43-45).*

In his prayer, Nehemiah first asked for God's attention and mercy. God did care about Nehemiah and the work of rebuilding, but Nehemiah needed God to display it and he also needed to sense God's presence and care. Nehemiah then asked God to battle their enemies for them. He depended on God to fight the battle. God gave him a work to do and he would not be distracted from it. This prayer seems pretty tough, but prayers in the Psalms are even tougher: <<*O God, break the teeth in their mouths; tear out the fangs of the young lions, O Lord!*>> (Psalm 58:6), and: <<*May their camp be a desolation; let no one live in their tents*>> (Psalm 69:25). It is proper for a child of God to pray such a prayer, because they are giving their violent inclinations over to God, and letting him deal with them.

<sup>6</sup> So we rebuilt the wall, and all the wall was joined together to half its height; for the people had a mind to work.

#### Nehemiah 4:6

The wall was joined together to half its height. At this point, the project could still be thwarted. The work was half finished. It was an exciting, but dangerous time; much had been done, but much was left to do. Fatigue and discouragement were ready to set in if given an opportunity. Yet the commitment of the people is a sign of likely success since it is based on faith in God.

For the people had a mind to work. One aspect of God's blessing on this project was that he gave the people a deep desire to do the work, and he sustained that desire throughout the time that the wall was being built. The answer to Nehemiah's prayer did not come in the form of punishing or stopping the opponents but in encouraging the minds of the faithful to continue in their work of rebuilding the wall. This was clearly a work of the Holy Spirit in God's people.

<sup>7</sup> 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 the gaps were beginning to be closed, they were very angry, <sup>8</sup> and all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it.

#### Nehemiah 4:7-8

The Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites. Geshem was an Arab, and Tobiah an Ammonite. It looks as though they belonged to certain groups in Judah who were strongly opposed to the project. Ashdod was formerly a Philistine city on

the Mediterranean Sea coast to the west, but it became the name of the entire province, first under Assyria, then under Persia. The people groups named here suggest that the Jewish community was surrounded on three sides – east, west, and south. This plot runs counter to the clear authorisation that Nehemiah received from the Persian king, so it is hard to judge how successful it could hope to be. Yet surely it was intimidating, since Susa was about 1,100 miles or 1,770 km away, a journey of approximately 55 days averaging 20 miles or 32 km per day.

The gaps were beginning to be closed. The wall was only half as high as it should be but it was almost continuous now. Both the workers and the opponents could see that the project was progressing well and that it could be completed. The emotions of the two sides were clearly polar opposites.

The enemies of the work were very angry probably because their own plans were failing and, against all the odds, the Jews were succeeding.

**It must be that the work of God often makes the soul of the enemy of the believer angry. He must often rage against the progress being made by God's people in touching a lost world for Jesus Christ. It is no bad thing to make the devil angry.**

All plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem. As the work progressed the enemies became more serious. Now they did not simply complain or mock, they threatened and planned for violence. On the one hand, this was serious: the wall was built to protect against the attacks of violence and now it seemed that the very building of the wall may prompt an attack to come. It would have been easy for the people to fear and to think perhaps all their work would be made useless. On the other hand, this was not serious at all. The reader should notice that they did not actually attack - they just talked about it. Sanballat and Tobiah were hoping that the threat of attack would be enough. Satan uses the same strategy of fear against Christians, and if they are paralysed by a threat the threat has worked, even when nothing actually happens.

And to cause confusion. This is an important strategy of Satan - to create confusion among the people of God. A confused people will never move forward and fulfil God's work. They are usually confused because they are distracted by the enemies' tricks instead of focusing on God and his promises.

<sup>9</sup> So we prayed to our God, and set a guard as a protection against them day and night.

#### Nehemiah 4:9

So we prayed to our God, and set a guard. Nehemiah has prayed before in a threatening situation: <<*So I prayed to the God of heaven*>> (Nehemiah 2:4b). Along with his prayers, he takes prudent action. Nothing would make them stop

depending on God through prayer. They might have given up, believing the continued attack was a failure on God's part to answer prayer before - but they had more trust in God than that. God allowed the attack to go on, even though he could have instantly swept it away. Yet he allowed it to continue because he was delighted that his people drew closer to him with a deeper trust than ever before. God did his perfect work both in building the walls and his people. They also knew that prayer did not mean they were to do nothing. They used sanctified common sense to do what they should have, protecting against attack, using willing servants of God to be the wall until the wall was built. Prayers do not replace actions; they make the actions effective for God's work.

**Paul sees such times of trial as one way that God tests his people, not to punish them but to help build their inner strength, faith and trust in him. In this, Paul notes: <<No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it>> (1 Corinthians 10:13).**

**Day and night.** This shows that Nehemiah was determined. He would not let the security of daylight or the sleepiness of night keep him from the work. This sent a powerful message. It sent a message to the people of God saying, "We are committed. This is going to succeed, because God is with us, and will enable us to overcome every obstacle." It sent a message to the enemies saying, "You will not succeed. God's work is going on, and will not be stopped. We will make whatever sacrifices necessary to see it done - weary days, sleepless nights, it does not matter." It sent a message to God: "We trust in you, and our faith is a living faith - a faith of actions, not just words. We love and trust in you, Lord."

<sup>10</sup> But Judah said, 'The strength of the burden-bearers is failing, and there is too much rubbish, so that we are unable to work on the wall.'

<sup>11</sup> And our enemies said, 'They will not know or see anything before we come upon them and kill them and stop the work.'<sup>12</sup> When the Jews who lived near them came, they said to us ten times, 'From all the places where they live they will come up against us.'

#### **Nehemiah 4:10-12**

**But Judah said.** Judah was supposed to be the strongest, bravest tribe. This had been prophesied by a dying Jacob in Egypt: <<*Judah, your brothers shall praise you; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons shall bow down before you. Judah is a lion's whelp; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He crouches down, he stretches out like a lion, like a lioness – who dares rouse him up? The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and the*

*obedience of the peoples is his. Binding his foal to the vine and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he washes his garments in wine and his robe in the blood of grapes; his eyes are darker than wine, and his teeth whiter than milk>>* (Genesis 49:8-12). It was the tribe of great kings and ultimately, the Messiah himself. It was a special challenge and a discouragement to have this word come from the tribe of Judah. Nehemiah and the Jews rebuilding Jerusalem have been standing strong in the face of attack; but now that the rebuilding work is at the half-way point, and wall is almost continuous, special challenges arise.

**The strength of the burden-bearers is failing.** The half-way point mentioned in v.6 is a dangerous place. Much remains to be done, but fatigue sets in because much has already been done. It is not enough to just begin well. Many a team has had a great first half only to lose in the final minutes. The rebuilding work has gone very well and many obstacles have been overcome but the job is not done yet, the game is not over yet, there is still time to lose.

**There is too much rubbish.** The work of rebuilding the walls was not only construction but cleaning and hauling away the rubble from the ruined walls. The ruins of the walls, lying in waste for 100 years had become a collecting point for all kinds of rubbish. Clearing away the rubble was not an option - it had to be done. The destroyed parts of the wall and the accumulated rubbish had to be cleared away so the walls could be rebuilt upon their foundations. If they did not do this, the walls would not stand at all.

**We are unable to work on the wall.** So the excavation work had to start. Before they could build the walls up, they had to tear down and clear away the rubble. They had to go down before they could go up. It was difficult because often the work of building is a lot easier - or more fun - than clearing away the rubbish. It was difficult because as the mound of rubble was torn down the city was even more vulnerable than before. The reader can imagine some of the people thinking, "Do not take away the rubble; our enemies are near and you merely clear a path for them to come in." It was difficult because there have always been those who will defend any heap of rubble, no matter how useless it is. This is bad thinking; the old needs to be cleared away so that a new, true foundation can be built. The heart of the people as shown in v.10 must have been a discouragement for Nehemiah; it is much easier to lead when the followers are full of enthusiasm and have a heart to work. However, true leadership shines through when that enthusiasm and belief in the work begins to fade?

**And our enemies said.** Verse 10 may mark the lowest point in the spirits of those doing the work. Things were already in a bad state, and the discouraged workers felt like giving up. Now the enemy planned its raid on the workers, to crush those rebuilding the walls.

**They will not know or see anything.** It is doubtful that these enemies knew exactly how discouraged the people of God were. But certainly, the counsels of spiritual darkness in high places knew and the attack was planned. Often attacks from the adversary are successful only if they come as a surprise. When God's people are on guard the enemy sees little victory.

**Kill them and stop the work.** The enemies of God's people paid a backhanded compliment by saying this. They knew by now the only way to get them to stop serving God and doing his work was to kill them. This cannot be said of every servant of God today. For many, the devil does not have to kill anyone if discouragement, compromise, money, relationships, frustration, or trouble get them to stop serving God.

**The Jews who lived near them.** This is a wonderful example of the power and goodness of God. The enemies of God and his people did their best but God is always in control. The enemies did not know there were faithful Jews listening to their plotting.

**They said to us ten times.** It is easy to picture this scene, and see the informants repeating over and over again, "An attack is coming! It's for real! They will defeat us!" Those who overheard the plan did not have the wisdom to know what to do in response. They were in a panic and they were probably troubled that Nehemiah did not also panic.

**From all the places where they live they will come up against us.** These verses provide details that led to the action described in v.9 but spell it out at greater length and focus on the danger to the project. The task itself is massive and discouraging (v.10); the enemies have terrified the people with the threat of a deadly night attack (v.11); and the friends and families of people who have come in from the villages to work on the walls try to persuade them to come home because of the danger (v.12).

<sup>13</sup> So in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, in open places, I stationed the people according to their families, with their swords, their spears, and their bows. <sup>14</sup> After I looked these things over, I stood up and said to the nobles and the officials and the rest of the people, 'Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your kin, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes.'

#### **Nehemiah 4:13-14**

**So.** These verses reveal what Nehemiah did, but the reader can also think of what Nehemiah could have done in this situation. He could have done nothing and even been spiritual about it. "Well brother, we're just trusting in the Lord. We prayed

about it, and believe the Lord will deliver us somehow.” He could have panicked and started thinking it was his job alone to defend against the attack. What he did was to wisely and calmly trust God in the midst of the storm and to do the concrete things God would have him do to obtain the victory.

I stationed the people according to their families. Nehemiah again sets a guard. Setting them in family groups would have added incentive to their duties as they were protecting their own families as well as their section of the wall.

Their swords, their spears, and their bows. Nehemiah commanded them to bring out their armour. The threat was taken seriously, and so they were to put on the full armour and to get ready to fight with every resource available to them.

Do not be afraid is both a command and an exhortation, rooted in the call to believe that God can overcome his enemies: <<*See, the Lord your God has given the land to you; go up, take possession, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you; do not fear or be dismayed*>> (Deuteronomy 1:21), <<*I said to you, ‘Have no dread or fear of them’*>> (Deuteronomy 1:29), and: <<*I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go*>> (Joshua 1:9), as he has in the past, especially during the exodus from Egypt and the capture of Canaan from the fierce pagan nations.

Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome. Nehemiah put their mind into the right perspective. The challenge was great but there was no reason for fear. He who was in them was greater than he who was in the world: <<*I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!*>> (John 16:33).

Fight for your kin, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes. Nehemiah reminded them of what they were fighting for. People fight most effectively for the Lord when they keep in mind just how much there is to lose.

<sup>15</sup> When our enemies heard that their plot was known to us, and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to his work.

#### Nehemiah 4:15

God had frustrated it, i.e. their enemies’ plan: <<*Absalom and all the men of Israel said, ‘The counsel of Hushai the Archite is better than the counsel of Ahithophel.’ For the Lord had ordained to defeat the good counsel of Ahithophel, so that the Lord might bring ruin on Absalom*>> (2 Samuel 17:14), and: <<*He frustrates the devices of the crafty, so that their hands achieve no success*>> (Job 5:12). Once they saw the defences of the people of God, the enemies shrunk back. They did not want a battle because they knew they would lose. What the enemies wanted was for the people of God to hand them the

victory on a silver platter through failing to watch and be ready. From then on the immediate threat was apparently over, but the work continued with half the people's attention still given to defence.

We all returned to the wall, each to his work. This was the victory. Defending against the attack was not the victory; the people of God would not be at peace and security until the wall was rebuilt. Getting on with the work was the victory.

When God's people are under spiritual attack it is easy to feel that just enduring the storm is the victory. It is not. The attack often comes to prevent the progress and the work for the Lord. Victory is enduring the attack while continuing the progress and the work for the Lord.

<sup>16</sup> From that day on, half of my servants worked on construction, and half held the spears, shields, bows, and body-armour; and the leaders posted themselves behind the whole house of Judah, <sup>17</sup> who were building the wall. The burden-bearers carried their loads in such a way that each laboured on the work with one hand and with the other held a weapon.

#### Nehemiah 4:16-17

My servants were probably a group that were especially close to Nehemiah and perhaps specially trained. They may also have been his subordinate officials in the administration of Judæa.

Each laboured on the work with one hand and with the other held a weapon. Some of the servants did the work of defending and some did the work of building. The workers had a sword at their side and a trowel in their hands to get the work done. The Kingdom of God is built with both a sword and a trowel, a sword to come against every spiritual force of wickedness in high places: <<**Let the high praises of God be in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands, to execute vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples**>> (Psalm 149:6-7), and trowel to do the work of building up the people of God. Although Nehemiah and the people prayed and trusted God for protection, they also kept their weapons close at hand, ready to defend themselves from attack; God often accomplishes his purposes through ordinary human means.

<sup>18</sup> And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built. The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me. <sup>19</sup> And I said to the nobles, the officials, and the rest of the people, 'The work is great and widely spread out, and we are separated far from one another on the wall. <sup>20</sup> Rally to us wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet. Our God will fight for us.'

## Nehemiah 4:18-20

The work is great and widely spread out, and we are separated far from one another on the wall. With the people spread out all around the wall, they were potentially vulnerable at every point. Nehemiah addresses this problem by his plan to let the sound of the trumpet be heard, a well established call to arms: <<*When he arrived, he sounded the trumpet in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites went down with him from the hill country, having him at their head*>> (Judges 3:27), and: <<*Jonathan defeated the garrison of the Philistines that was at Geba; and the Philistines heard of it. And Saul blew the trumpet throughout all the land, saying, ‘Let the Hebrews hear!’*>> (1 Samuel 13:3).

The trumpet used was almost certainly a sheep or goat’s horn known as a Shofar.

Rally to us wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet. They stayed ready to sound the alarm at the slightest notice. They would not be caught off guard.

Our God will fight for us. This was all they needed to know although it does not negate their part in the fight. Examples from the past were: <<*The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still*>> (Exodus 14:14), and: <<*The Lord your God, who goes before you, is the one who will fight for you, just as he did for you in Egypt before your very eyes*>> (Deuteronomy 1:30).



A Shofar

<sup>21</sup> So we laboured at the work, and half of them held the spears from break of dawn until the stars came out. <sup>22</sup> I also said to the people at that time, ‘Let every man and his servant pass the night inside Jerusalem, so that they may be a guard for us by night and may labour by day.’

## Nehemiah 4:21-22

From break of dawn until the stars came out is a final picture of watchfulness, both day and night. They dedicated themselves to the work all the more, working hard from sunrise to past dark, even spending the night out at the site to protect it against attack. Nehemiah may have feared losing some of his workforce at night, so he kept them in the city of Jerusalem.

<sup>23</sup> So neither I nor my brothers nor my servants nor the men of the guard who followed me ever took off our clothes; each kept his weapon in his right hand.

#### Nehemiah 4:23

So neither I nor my brothers nor my servants nor the men of the guard who followed me ever took off our clothes. They kept their clothes on all the time because they did not want to be caught unprepared. They were always ready to respond to the blast of the trumpet.

Christians need to be armed with the same attitude today. They need to be always ready, always clothed with the righteousness of Jesus Christ, always wearing the armour of God: <<*Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil*>> (Ephesians 6:11), ready for that final trumpet blast that will gather them together with the Lord: <<*For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first*>> (1 Thessalonians 4:16).

My servants refers to Nehemiah's immediate associates and subordinate officials as is v.16.