

## EZRA-NEHEMIAH, part 12

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### Through Many Dangers, Toils and Snares, part 1 (Nehemiah 4)

#### I. Threats against God's Work, Nehemiah 4<sup>1</sup>

##### A. Ridicule (Neh. 4:1-6)

Verse 1 suggests that ridicule proceeds out of helplessness: "angry and greatly enraged" (RSV). Note the presence of the "army of Samaria" (v. 2), so Sanballat apparently had armed help at hand. And yet he could hardly use it, because Nehemiah had official permission from the king, which doubtless frustrated Sanballat to no end.<sup>2</sup>

##### 1. Mockery (Neh. 4:1-3)

Not being able to use military force against God's people, Sanballat turned to mockery. Tobiah's "fox" remark was said about walls that, according to Kenyon, were nine feet thick.<sup>3</sup>

##### 2. Prayer (Neh. 4:4-5)

Sanballat "heard" in verse 1; Yahweh will "hear" in verse 4. The last of verse 5 may only mean "they have insulted the builders,"<sup>4</sup> although the RSV takes it as provoking God in the presence of the builders.

Note what Nehemiah does here: he does not let go with a retort to the mockers, but has recourse to God.

How are we to view Nehemiah's prayer? Some interpreters get "antsy" here and think this practice is surely unworthy of New Testament Christians. But before we jump all over Nehemiah, we should keep the following observations in mind:<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Note in chapter 4 the difference in versification between the Hebrew and English texts: 3:33 in the Hebrew text is 4:1 in the English text; likewise, 4:1 in the Hebrew text is 4:7 in the English text.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. NICOT, 180.

<sup>3</sup> Breneman, NAC, 194.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. NICOT, 182.

<sup>5</sup> Breneman (NAC, 194ff.) has a fair treatment of this matter.

- a. It is a prayer for justice, for judgment against sin.
- b. As such, it is a prayer for *God* to act. Nehemiah is not presuming to take vengeance into his own hands; he commits that to God, which is exactly what Romans 12 instructs us to do.
- c. This prayer presupposes that the project in question is the work of God; hence to mock it or those doing it is to assault the honor of God.
- d. These are not *personal* enemies (as those Jesus speaks of in Matt. 5:43ff.) but enemies of God's kingdom.
- e. There is no indication that Sanballat, Tobiah, et al., repented or sought repentance, and so considerations like those in Matthew 18:21-22 do not apply (sentimentalists sometimes seem to expect such).

### 3. Persistence (Neh. 4:6)

Rather pedantic and ordinary sounding, but it is the way to proceed: "So we built the wall."

## **B. Intimidation – Nehemiah 4:7-23**

### 1. Vicious circle (Neh. 4:7-9)

From all four directions they are surrounded.

On Ashdod: Since the time of the Assyrian conquest of Palestine, the Philistine territory had been a separate province called Ashdod. Hence, Samaria to the north, Arabs to the south, Ammon to the east, and Ashdod to the west — Judah was surrounded. This is little different from the state of Israel today.

Sanballat had been "burned up" (v. 1), but now he and his cohorts were "really burned up" (v. 7), so much so that there was a possibility of an armed assault (v. 8).

Now note that the theology of verse 9 avoids both the errors of self-reliance and of laziness or quietude; it avoids both the sins of panic and of paralysis.

## 2. Triple trouble (Neh. 4:10-12)

### a. The “blues” (Neh. 4:10)

Myers (AB) translates:

The strength of the burden bearer is drooping,  
The rubbish heap so vast;  
And we are unable by ourselves  
To rebuild the wall.

This ditty indicates the discouragement of the builders. Perhaps this came on in light of the fresh threat in verses 7-9, and this is likely their despairing response.

### b. Threat (Neh. 4:11)

Not only Judah speaks (v. 10), but the enemy’s threat and intimidation is also announced.

### c. Gossip/propaganda, 12

Sounds as though the Jews living in neighboring villages picked up the threats and propaganda from the enemies, and repeat these to the workers. Perhaps the enemies would “leak” word of “plans” that were being made. Then those Jews to whom the plans were leaked would come to Jerusalem and repeat the rumors among the workers. It was all intended to demoralize.

## 3. Organized perseverance (Neh. 4:13-23)

### a. Immediate preparation (Neh. 4:13-14)

Folks placed in most vulnerable positions with weapons. Swords and spears were weapons used at close quarters (the spear was for stabbing and thrusting at close range). If the bows were composite bows, they would have a range of 700 yards, accurate to 300-400 yards.<sup>6</sup>

Then there is Nehemiah’s “Remember the Lord!” speech (v. 14). It is very like Deuteronomy 20:1-4, addressing fear. Note the effectiveness of this immediate reaction (v. 15a).

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<sup>6</sup> NICOT.

b. Revised strategy (Neh. 4:15-19)

In the revised building scheme there seem to be several groups:

- Some seem to have been attached to Nehemiah and were permanent guards (v. 16).
- There were the load-luggers (v. 17) who would carry loads and their weapons at the same time.
- Then there were the builders (v. 18), each with his sword strapped on.
- Finally, there was an alarm system in place (vv. 18b-20a).

c. Constant fact (Neh. 4:20b)

Here was the confidence that undergirded it all: “*Our God* [emphatic in Hebrew] will fight for us.”

d. Fresh demand (Neh. 4:21-23)

Note especially verse 22. There was to be no more “commuting.” Those working on the wall who lived outside Jerusalem were needed for guard duty at night. The unusually perilous circumstances called for uncommon measures for the immediate future.

### C. Theology of Nehemiah 4

1. There is a high cost to mocking the people of God (implicit in Nehemiah’s prayer in vv. 4-5).
2. God’s sovereignty is *stirring* (see vv. 9,14); sovereignty *moves* (it does not inhibit) human activity.
3. Is Nehemiah intended to be viewed as an ideal leader here?