

## **Nehemiah: Satan Hates a Good Thing**

**Nehemiah 4:1-14**

By **Dr. Derek Thomas**

*The Lord's Day Evening  
August 31, 2008*

Now turn with me if you would to the book of Nehemiah, and we are going to read this evening in chapter 4...Nehemiah 4...and we're going to read the first fourteen verses. Before we do so, let's once again look to God in prayer.

*Lord our God, we acknowledge again that this is Your word we're about to read. You caused it to be written; You preserved it for us so that tonight we can read it in a known tongue in a translation that has been wonderfully done on our behalf. We thank You for the privilege of a Bible that we can own and take home and read for ourselves. We know this hasn't been the case for many of Your children in time past. We thank You for this great privilege. Now we ask for Your blessing. Pour out Your Spirit. Grant us eyes to see and ears to hear, and a will that resolves to respond to You. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Now Nehemiah has gone on his night expedition throughout Jerusalem. He's made it about halfway through the city on some beast of burden...a few others with him. As a consequence he has urged the people to start building. And last week we saw how 41 different sections of the Wall of Jerusalem were identified and various people allotted to various sections—in the main being allotted to sections directly opposite where they actually lived.

Now no good thing will ever be allowed to go on unmolested by Satan, and so as we begin to read in the first verse of chapter 4, that's precisely what we see:

Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews. 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?" 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!" 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. 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.

So we built the wall. And all the wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work.

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. And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it. And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night.

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." And our enemies said, "They will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work." At that time the Jews who lived near them came from all directions and said to us ten times, "You must return to us." 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. 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."

Stirring stuff, isn't it? You can't help but fall in love with this passage. Well, it was one of Paul's observations coming back from his first missionary journey, as he went through Lystra and Derbe on his way to Antioch, that "it is through many tribulations that we enter the kingdom of God." Every good work will be opposed. Every attempt to advance the kingdom of God will meet opposition...opposition from Satan, who prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Don't make any mistake about it: behind Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites here, there is the malevolence of Satan. The devil is at work here.

## **I. The enemy's attack.**

The first thing I want us to see tonight is the enemy's attack. It begins with words, a whispering campaign...psychological warfare. Sanballat, who is the governor of Samaria to the north of Jerusalem, knowing of course that Nehemiah has come with letters of commendation and permission from King Artaxerxes the king of Persia...so he needs to be careful what he's saying and what he's doing. And he begins to speak to his men and to his army in Samaria — what ramshackle army

in Samaria he had, we can only conjecture, but it was sufficient to put some fear into Jews in Jerusalem, to be sure, and even more in those who live in the hinterlands surrounding Jerusalem. They could certainly kill and maim. Threats were to be taken seriously.

One wonders how Nehemiah knew what Sanballat was saying to his men. Perhaps you might imagine at Sanballat's own devise there were men who were being sent into the city to spread this word. If you want to know what Sanballat has been saying, look at the questions that they ask in verse 2: "What are these feeble Jews doing?"

What a shower they are! What a feeble, sorry lot they are. They're not soldiers; they're not even wall-builders! They're just old men and women and little children. Will they restore it for themselves? The task, you see, is utterly beyond them. Will they sacrifice? Do you think that if they offer a few sacrifices in the temple that the wall will rise by itself by an act of magic? Will they finish it in one day? Do they have any idea how long this task is going to take them? Will they revive out of the heaps of rubbish stones that have been blackened by the fires that have burned the city in the past?" ("Don't they realize that limestone, when it's subject to heat, will crumble?" is what he's saying.)

And Tobiah adds that a little fox [a little fox is the size of a puppy]...a little fox getting up on top of these walls will bring those walls tumbling down.

You see what's going on. It's a whispering campaign. It's psychological warfare. And it gets to them. And they hear it. And no doubt there was a brave face on the outside, but you can imagine in the evening when the sun is going down and the task seems to be stretching out before them...and what kind of wall was it that they were building? They were not stonemasons. One of the men is described with his daughters, you remember...what kind of wall were they building? I mean no disrespect. These stones were indeed blackened with soot. They probably were crumbling. It didn't look like a great defensive wall even if it was nine feet thick, as excavations by Kathleen Kenyon and others seem to suggest. Whispering campaigns and psychological warfares have always been a part of warfare. It still is to this day. The enemies attack.

## **II. The response of God's people.**

Secondly, I want us to see the people's response, but first of all I want us to see Nehemiah's response. This godly man, this extraordinary leader of men...this whispering campaign has hit a raw nerve. And what does Nehemiah do? You notice in verses 4-5, it's a prayer, of course. Before we look at the prayer, do you notice it's not even introduced with any sort of parenthetical remark? All of a sudden you're reading about the words of Tobiah that a fox is going to break down the stone wall, and then — boom! It's the prayer! It's as though Nehemiah

is copying it down from his memoirs. It was a prayer he wrote in his diary. It was a prayer he thought about. It was a prayer that he had meditated over. It was a prayer that he had copied down into his notes, and when he comes to write the book of Nehemiah under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit, he doesn't even provide any sort of introduction...he just writes down the prayer.

It's an imprecatory prayer. It's a prayer that some Christians perhaps would have certain difficulties with. It's a prayer first of all: "Hear, O our God, for we are despised." It's first of all a prayer that looks to God to side with the Jews in this matter because the assaults and taunts and jibes of Sanballat and Tobiah, though they were aimed at the Jews, were in effect aimed at the Jews' God. This is as much an insult to the Lord God of heaven and earth as it is to the Jews in Jerusalem. And Nehemiah begins his prayer and it's as though he's saying, "Listen to me, and I say it respectfully, this affects You more than it affects me. This is Your honor; this is Your glory that is at stake here.' And he's asking God to judge His enemies. This is not a prayer for personal vengeance. "Turn back their taunt on their own heads, and give them up to be plundered in a land where they are captives."

Now for some, as they read this prayer it's an unfortunate side of Nehemiah. You know, Nehemiah comes across as a bully throwing his weight around and using religious...quasi-religious justification for what is in effect his own personal vendetta and vengeance and lack of love and lack of sympathy, and lack of respect towards his enemies. After all, didn't Jesus say in the Sermon on the Mount that we're to love our enemies?

Well, this is a prayer for justice. A great injustice is being done here, and first of all what Nehemiah is asking for is that God would vindicate His own honor, His own integrity, His own justice.

If it's hard for us in the modern (and particularly post-modern) West with all our cultural relativism to enter into the sense of injustice that Nehemiah feels, we need to go back to Psalm 139: "Do not I hate sin with perfect hatred?" You know, the nearer we get to that sentiment that there are certain things (and yes, there are certain people who embody those things) in which we are to get close to what Psalm 139 says: "Do not I hate them with perfect hatred?" It's the flip side to what we pray in the Lord's Prayer: "Hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." It's a prayer for God to do something! It's not a prayer for personal vengeance. It's a prayer for God to intervene and to uphold the integrity of His own holiness and righteousness.

Some might suggest that what Nehemiah should have done is the Matthew 18 principle, but that's just sentimentalism. Sanballat and Tobiah *were not* brothers, and Matthew 18 does not apply here.

There are those who think that the Old Testament was written in a sort of

evolutionary way: that you have in the Old Testament a progression from lower morals to the more heightened morals of the ethics of the New Testament. [‘This is Old Testament. Nehemiah belongs to that period when they said those sorts of things, but we don't say those sorts of things in the New Testament.’] Well, that's not true. In the very last book of the Old Testament, in the book of Revelation, the almost seraphic Apostle John sees the injustice of believers who have been martyred for the cause of the gospel, and he sees their souls before the throne of God. And what are they saying? They're chanting together, ‘We forgive them’? No, that's not what they're saying! “How long, O Lord, before you avenge our blood upon the peoples of the earth?” That's what they're saying. They're calling out for the vindication of the righteousness of God. There's an injustice here that flies in the face of the righteousness of God.

Should Nehemiah have prayed for Sanballat? There might be a gentle pious soul in the congregation that thinks that's what Nehemiah should have done. And you may be right. In addition to praying for God's justice — weren't we hearing that this morning? Justice and mercy hand in hand?

I remember visiting in a prison in Northern Ireland a man who had come to faith in Jesus Christ. And he had come to faith in Jesus Christ partly through a sermon that I had preached and that had been taped, and somebody had given him this tape. And I went to visit him. You can't imagine the security involved in visiting what in effect was a terrorist prisoner who had been involved in acts of terrorism, including acts of murder. And I remember him saying to me with absolute clarity, “I am being justly punished.” Actually, he said, “I am being unjustly punished,” because he believed in the death penalty. But I remember him saying to me, “I am being justly punished for what I have done, and yet God has shown me mercy.” He was a Christian and I wholly believe that I will see him in heaven, but he was suffering the punishment of the state and rightly so. And he sought in no way to be removed from the just deserts of what he had done.

Well, I think our Christianity would be all the more meaningful if we could get something of what Nehemiah is doing in this prayer into our own Christianity, because our own Christianity can too often be effeminate and irrelevant in an unjust world.

Well, if that was Nehemiah's response (and don't miss the point that his first response was prayer; he turned to the Lord in prayer), the response of the people...they built the wall! They built it, Nehemiah says, to half of its height, because “they had a mind to work.” But the opposition didn't stop. And because the taunts and whispering campaign of Sanballat and Tobiah had proved ineffective, the wagons now begin to circle and you have the Arabs to the south, and you have the Ammonites to the east, and you've got the Ashdodites to the west, and you've got Sanballat and Tobiah to the north. And you've got the wagons circling Jerusalem. And do you notice what they did? They (verse 9)... “We prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and

night.” That's a beautiful thing.

First of all, don't you get the impression that the people have been influenced by Nehemiah? One gets the impression reading Ezra/Nehemiah that the people were not instinctively a people of prayer. It is the influence of men like Ezra and Nehemiah, the influence of godly leadership within the believing community that actually, as it were, fires up a desire for prayer within the people themselves. Now the people are praying!

But they're not just praying. That's the first thing they do, but they pray *and* work. They pray and set a guard. As Cromwell said in his Irish campaign, “Trust in God and keep your powder dry.” And that's precisely what they're doing. It's not enough simply to pray. It's the first thing that we should do, that God would guide us, that God would give us wisdom. But at the same time they set a guard. They set a watch.

And then, in the hinterlands (verse 10) there's a beginning of a loss of confidence in Judah...and that seems to be a reference to those living outside of Jerusalem. “The strength of those who bear the burden is failing. There's too much rubble. By ourselves we will not be able to rebuild the wall.” And the enemies said, “They will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work.” This is terrorism. You won't know. You'll be sleeping in your bed at night, and your enemy will be there. You'll be dead before you know it. There's no point in setting these guards in the little intervals in the wall. For all of their bows and arrows and spears, they were not an army. They were not fighting men. And these terrorists...this whispering campaign is beginning again: ‘We'll be inside. We'll be right within your gates, and you'll wake up and there we will be in your bedroom. And you'll be dead.’ And it's time to get serious. It's time to get serious.

You notice in verse 12 there were certain Jews living out in the hinterlands now, and ten times they come and they say to the people in Jerusalem, “You must return to us.” Don't you get a little sense that Nehemiah's a little irritated that ten times they've come and whined in Jerusalem? And it's time to get serious, and the work stops. The work of rebuilding stops. It's time to fight. It's time to go to war. And Nehemiah says this speech:

“Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, and your sons, and your daughters, and your wives, and your homes.”

This was not a war in some far torn place across the other side of the world. This was their home. These were their wives and children that were at stake.

Do you remember — some of you will remember — in *The Two Towers* when Aragorn is at Helm's Deep? You know, it's at the Hornburg, and Aragorn is speaking with Gimli and Legolas, and they're preparing for the battle that's about

to happen that evening. And there's a picture, you remember, of old men and little boys, and they're putting on armor that's too small or too big, and they're trying to lift swords that they can't even lift. And Aragorn says, "Farmers and ferriers and stable boys...these are no soldiers!" And Gimli says to him, "They've seen too many winters." And Legolas says, "Far too few." And do you remember earlier that day when Aragorn is speaking to King Thioden and he's trying to convince the king (who actually knows, but he's trying to convince the king) that these armies, this ten-thousand-strong army, it hasn't come simply to plunder crops. It's come to destroy the world of men. And Thioden turns to him in anger and says to him,

"What would you have me do? Look at them! Their courage hangs by a thread, and if this is to be their end, I would have them make such an end of it that it would be worthy of remembrance."

Well, this may not be the great battle of Helm's Deep, to be sure, but it was a battle for their survival, this tiny little community in Jerusalem, and their lives are being threatened. Their wives and their children and their homes are being threatened, and Nehemiah ...and thank God that He raises up a Nehemiah, a leader who calls them to fight! We're going to look at the fight next week...the battle next week. The smell of war and smoke and blood, next Sunday evening.

But tonight what's it teaching us?

### **III. Application.**

Well, two things. First of all, Satan will always oppose a good thing. Every time. Don't be surprised, friends. Are you pressing through trials and tribulations, not because you've walked in disobedience to the ways of God's commandments, but because you were actually trying to walk in the ways of God's commandments and you find yourself in trouble? Well, join the club, as they say. Because here, 450 years BC, is a little community of people, and they're experiencing the trials and tribulations that always accompany the work of God. Never forget...never forget that Satan prowls like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. This story was written for our instruction, for our benefit, that we might be forewarned, that we might see. You know, Satan only has a few stratagems. Don't give him too much credit! He only knows one or two tricks. But the Bible is given to you that you may see what they are, and being forewarned, you may also be forearmed for battle.

But surely the second thing that we see here is the importance of prayer. Yes, there's a battle here. Yes, they were armed. Yes, they were ready to fight. But they weren't prepared to do anything without first of all committing it to the Lord.

Dear people, we are meant to be a company that is known by our prayerfulness,

that is known by our commitment to prayer.

That's the lesson. I think that's the fundamental lesson of this passage. That even though they knew the battle was coming...and do you think they prayed that God would remove this battle? I'm sure they did. Just like we are praying, and now we're not sure what to pray for with a hurricane that's coming? I mean, do you now still pray that it's not going to hit New Orleans when it's about six hours away? Yes. And you're not surprised, perhaps, when God doesn't answer your prayer in precisely the way that you asked it, because His wisdom is greater than yours, and He knows what's best for us. But still they prayed. Still they sought the Lord. And may God give to us, you and me, that determination and commitment in everything by prayer and supplication to make our wants and needs and wishes known to Him.

Let's pray together.

*Father, we thank You for the Scriptures. We thank You for this extraordinary passage. We pray that we might learn from it; that we might find courage and help and resourcefulness, and resolve and commitment to face the trials that come our way. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Please stand; receive the Lord's benediction.

*Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.*

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