

Nehemiah: Pray and Keep Your Powder Dry!

Nehemiah 4:15-23

By [Dr. Derek Thomas](#)

*The Lord's Day Evening
September 7, 2008*

Please be seated. Now turn with me if you would to the book of Nehemiah, chapter 4, and we are going to read this evening the second half of the chapter, beginning at verse 15 through to the end of the chapter. We left off last Lord's Day evening in the midst of a preparation for battle, and tonight we're going to resume now that story as Nehemiah and the folk in Jerusalem are standing guard against threatened incursions and threats of death and mayhem from all sides of Jerusalem.

Now let's pick up at verse 15. Before we do so, let's look to God in prayer.

Lord our God, we are conscious again this is the Scripture. This is Your word; You caused it to be written. We pray, O Lord, as we read it, that You would grant by the Holy Spirit illumination: that we might read, mark, and learn, and inwardly digest, and all for Jesus' sake. Amen.

This is God's word:

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. 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, 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. And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built. The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me. And I said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, "The work is great and widely spread, and we are separated on the wall, far from one another. In the place where you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us."

So we labored at the work, and half of them held the spears from the

break of dawn until the stars came out. 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." So neither I nor my brothers nor my servants nor the men of the guard who followed me, none of us took off our clothes; each kept his weapon at his right hand.

So far, God's holy and inerrant word. May He add His blessing to the reading of it.

Well, Jerusalem is surrounded...surrounded by enemies, surrounded by oppressors, surrounded by a ring of enemies to the north, south, east, and west. You may wonder at the legality of this threat of war. It's coming from Sanballat and Tobiah and some Arabs and others that Nehemiah has referenced in the early part of this chapter in verse 7 — Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites. After all, this is still under the dominion and rule of Persia.

You'll remember from our study of Ezra that when a similar threat of violence had occurred, twelve years now in Nehemiah's past, King Artaxerxes had stopped the building of the wall. We saw last week how certain of the folk who lived out in the hinterlands who came in to build each day...some of them were whining. "Ten times," Nehemiah says, and you sort of sense his irritation that they're constantly coming into the city and saying that the work is too great. And perhaps their family are asking them to come home and protect them — and understandably, since they were closest to these enemies. And Nehemiah has been busy — busy responding to the psychological intimidation, responding first of all by prayer, and then responding by prayer plus establishing guards. There was a certain part, where the threat was at its height, that in the weakest parts of the wall (perhaps those parts of the wall that hadn't yet been built) he stationed guards while others kept on working. And then when the threat was at his highest, the work seems to have come to a stop while Nehemiah arms the people and persuades them and motivates them to war — to fight for themselves, to fight for their wives, to fight for their children, to fight for their homes.

There's been something now of a temporary respite. There's been a lull, I think, between verses 14 and 15. It seems in verse 15 that the enemies have got wind of the preparations that have been made in the city. Perhaps Nehemiah made sure that they saw that they were being prepared, made sure that his speech and the sight of the arms, the swords and the bows and the coats of mail and so on, were seen by his enemies. And so the work now begins again.

There are five things I want us to see in this second half of Nehemiah 4. The first is a lesson we've seen many times. We've seen it in the book of Ezra. We've already seen it in the first three and a half chapters and more of the book of Nehemiah, and it's the lesson of opposition.

I. Opposition

There's always opposition. This is a work of God. Nehemiah is God's servant. He is a governor sent back to Jerusalem with a purpose — a purpose to build and defend the city of Jerusalem. It's not just any city. It's the city of God. It's at the heart of the covenantal purposes of God in redemption in the old covenant.

Nehemiah had been given a burden for this task. He had prayed about this task. God in His providence had opened up a way for him to return. He was persuaded that this was God's work. And he had met opposition...opposition that came from the world, and opposition that came from the flesh, and, yes, opposition that came from the devil. He met it in the world around him — the world of Sanballat and the world of Tobiah, and the world of the Arabs, and the world of these Ammonites and others. Nehemiah had to set himself against that opposition. He had to motivate the people of God to take a stand against the worldview of the prevailing cultures around Jerusalem.

It's no different for us. There is opposition. There is always opposition. There's always hostility. There's always somebody carping about Christianity. There's always someone with a snide, derogatory remark about the things that we believe. And like Nehemiah and like the builders of this wall, we must stand and we must stand counter to the culture that is all around us. We thought the culture wars had gone away, and in the past couple of weeks you've seen them arise again in all of their fury. The simple mention of family and children and marriage, and once again you see how at odds one culture can be against another, let alone Christian culture...let alone biblical culture.

There's opposition from the world. There's opposition from the flesh. We've seen already how some of the people in Jerusalem had succumbed to the psychological intimidation. There'd been internal instability in Jerusalem. There had been those who said the work is too great. There were those who said the threats were too real...the threats against family and the threats against home, and the threats against livelihoods. And Nehemiah had urged them to watch and pray, lest they enter into temptation. And behind this opposition of the world, and behind this opposition of the flesh, the weakness of the flesh (because the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak...the flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh, and these are contrary one to the other), and behind all of that there is the opposition of the devil.

Make no mistake about it. Behind the Sanballats and Tobiahs of the world there is the fierce enmity of Satan himself. He prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. That's one of the lessons of this book of Nehemiah: that in every good work, in every work that seeks to build the kingdom of God, in every work that seems to advance the honor and glory of Jesus Christ, you can expect opposition from outside, from inside, from demonic forces.

My dear friends, learn to expect it. Don't be taken by surprise. Don't be taken off-guard. Learn to see that the battle that we are involved in is a spiritual battle. It's a battle that Nehemiah fought. It's a battle that Ezra fought. It's a battle that Jesus fought. It's a battle that the Apostle Paul fought. It's a battle that will always be fought until Jesus comes again. "In this world ye will have tribulation."

II. Duty.

But the second thing I want us to see is duty. Don't you sense that as you read this particular chapter? The sense of duty, the sense of, yes, obligation that Nehemiah instills upon the men and women in Jerusalem. Look at him after the lull that has occurred in verse 15:

"When our enemies had heard that it was known to us..." [that their threats were known to us and that they'd made certain preparations toward it] "...and that God had frustrated their plan, we all returned to the wall, each to his work."

I think Ligon emphasized work this morning in one of the aspects of what an elder is called to do. It's a work. But here, in a more general sense, there was a work to do. There was an obligation to be met. It was something that had been laid upon their consciences, and they were bound to do it.

They're old-fashioned words, aren't they? Duty, and honor, and loyalty, and integrity, and "stickability". They're such old-fashioned words, and I suppose we don't balk at those words if we are trying to say to a soldier.... You want a soldier to be loyal. You want a soldier to be dutiful. You want a soldier to be obedient. You want a soldier to salute and to carry out the orders. Well, haven't we just been singing a hymn saying that we're soldiers? We're all soldiers! *Onward, Christian Soldiers!* We're soldiers in the Lord's army. We're soldiers in the Lord's warfare. We have things to do. There is an obligation that is set upon us. There are things that we're obliged to do. There is a work for us to do.

It's the difference, isn't it, between justification and sanctification. In justification we say we are saved by grace alone through faith alone, apart from works. We're not obligated *to do* anything in order to be saved.

"Nothing in my hands I bring;
Simply to Thy cross I cling."

But it's sanctification that's entirely different. Now as saved individuals, now as those who are in union with Christ, now as those who have been adopted into the household and family of God, we *are obligated* now to serve our Master—to serve Him with all of our hearts, to serve Him without quarreling, to serve Him without innuendo, to serve Him without negotiation, to do the work that God has given us

to do. Yes, it will involve a struggle. Yes, it will be difficult. Yes, there will be ups and downs, but you get the sense that what Nehemiah is doing is urging them to duty, urging them to obedience, urging them to the task that God has laid down.

We have a task: to live out the Christian life, to live it out to its fullness; to obey the commandments that God has laid upon us to be a witness for Him in all the world. And, yet, my friends, it's not legalism. It's not an insufficient reflection on the unconditional-ness of our acceptance with Jesus to say we're obligated. We're obligated to work out our salvation. We're obligated to live for the glory of God. We're obligated to do whatever it is that Jesus is asking us to do. As we read the Bible, as we read this particular chapter tonight, in the providence of God this is where we are. One of the questions we need to ask ourselves is, "Lord, what do You want me to do? As a result of reading this passage? As a result of rightly understanding this passage, what is it now that You want me to do? Give me obedience. Give me a willing heart. Give me a heart that responds, 'Yes, my Lord, because nothing is too great for You to ask me to do.'"

III. Organization.

But the third word I want us to think about is organization. Because you get a sense—you get more than a sense!—that Nehemiah was a great leader, a leader of men. And one of the hallmarks, one of the qualities that makes him a great leader is his ability to organize. He delegates and motivates. He makes sure that the wall that needs to be built...and it's divided into 40, perhaps 41, perhaps 42 different sections...he organizes the building in such a way that many of them are building right adjacent to where they actually lived. What a phenomenal thing that must have been to motivate them to build that part of the wall really strong, because their families lived on the other side of that wall!

He has a wall that's a mile long and four to five feet in width at the top and possibly nine to ten feet in width at the bottom, and upwards of fifteen to twenty feet high! And it was all done in the space of seven weeks, and all through organization.

When there's a threat of war, Nehemiah organizes the people. Half of them are building, half of them are standing guard. Even at night when the threat of terrorist incursion...and that's what they had threatened to do, to suddenly appear in their bedroom at night and slit their throats...he has the men who come in to build who are living in the hinterlands actually stay in the city at night, so that they're on a double shift. They work by day and they guard by night. And it's organization and it's planning.

Now there are certain folk — and we have certain sympathies with them — and they read something about planning and organization and they see that as contrary to the Spirit: that the way the church grows and the way the church

prospers is by the outpouring of the Spirit, and you should depend on the Spirit. And all this talk about organization and all this talk about the sort of things that Nehemiah is doing here is a worldly mentality.

Well, not for Nehemiah, it wasn't. And not for the elders here in this church. We are currently undergoing a ten-year review of our mission policy and our strategy as a church, and it involves an enormous amount of organization. And that is not contrary to the operation of the Holy Spirit.

Did you read that verse? It's a wonderful little verse! That with one hand when they were carrying stones, or when they were laying stones or carrying perhaps soil to place in between the stones, they were working with one hand but they have a sword in the other! They were ready to fight at a moment's notice. If bandits had come around the corner or up from a ravine somewhere, they were ready to fight. They could throw down their rocks or maybe throw them at the people that were coming at them, but they'd have a sword in their hand.

In 1859, Charles Haddon Spurgeon had a magazine that's today actually alive and well and prospering, and still faithful to the word of God. It's called *Sword and Trowel*, and it was published out of the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London. Peter Masters, who is the current minister of the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, still edits the magazine called *Sword and Trowel*. And it derived its name from this passage — sword and trowel. There is divine obligation upon us to work, but at the same time to defend. They worked and they defended. And all of that required enormous organization, planning, and strategy.

IV. Preparedness.

The fourth word I want us to see is *preparedness*. Nehemiah's skill was to plan for realistic events, the possibility of certain things that were about to happen...the lookouts that he had, the way he prepared the people for battle. In verse 23, right at the end:

“Neither I nor my brothers nor my servants nor the men of the guard who followed me, none of us took off our clothes; each kept his weapon at his right hand.”

Even at night they were prepared. They were prepared by day; they were prepared by night. He had a trumpeter who stayed by Nehemiah's side the whole time so that wherever there might be a threat of an incursion into the city the trumpeter would blast his trumpet, and they would come running to the sound of that trumpet. Wherever they would hear that sound, they were to run there in order to defend that part of the city. It's not just organization, it's preparation. He made preparation.

You know, I was reading the other day of the great Czech missionary, John Hus, a pre-Reformation reformer, a man of extraordinary faith and ability and influence. And when he was finally caught and he was sentenced to die, he was sentenced to be burnt at the stake. And in his cell — the cell was lit up with a flame, a torch — he thrust his right hand into the flame so that he might feel what it was like, because he wanted to prepare himself that he might die well. Extraordinary...quite extraordinary, how he prepared himself to die.

Well, here is Nehemiah, and he's saying you need to be prepared for whatever eventuality may come. In this particular instance, it's war. It's the threat to life and property, and you need to prepare.

V. Faith.

And that preparation goes hand in hand with the fifth thing, and that's *faith*. That's faith. Do you notice what he says to them at verse 20? "Our God will fight for us."

Now that's a wonderful statement, isn't it? It's a statement of trust in the sovereignty of God: "Our God will fight for us." Nehemiah was convinced that God would fight for him. He was convinced that the work in which he was involved was of the Lord. He had prayed about it. God had opened up providence in such a way as to confirm that this was indeed what the will of God for Nehemiah was, and he was convinced despite all the opposition and the difficulty and all the hostility, it was still God's will. It wasn't just God's will when things were going well; it was still God's will when things were going badly. But our God will fight for us.

But that didn't mean for Nehemiah that he didn't plan, and he didn't organize, and he didn't have a strategy. He could believe in the sovereignty of God but still have a sword in his hands. He could believe that God would fight for him, but he still had a responsibility to fight himself.

That's a wonderful example, isn't it, of the Christian life. What does Paul say to the Philippians? "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." You have a responsibility to work out your salvation. You have a responsibility to walk in the ways of the Lord. You have a responsibility to read your Bible and to pray, and to come to church and to surround yourself with good fellowship of brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. You've got a responsibility to grow in the faith, "for it is God that works in you, both to will and to do of His good pleasure." You work out your salvation, but God works in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure.

"Trust in God and keep your powder dry!" Cromwell said, in the Irish wars of the seventeenth century. Well, that's exactly what Nehemiah is doing here. He's made all these preparations. He's made all these plans. He's prepared the

people, and he's prepared himself for the worst eventuality. He's realistic about the nature of what it means to be a believer in the fifth century B.C. But he wants them to understand that at every point they are to trust in the Lord God. "God will fight for us."

When Hudson Taylor was on his way to China, he was in a sailboat and the captain of the boat came to him. They were just off the coast of Sumatra and there was no wind, and the boat was drifting towards an island. And the captain came and knocked on the door of Hudson Taylor and said to him the boat was drifting, there was no wind, and this island was thought to be inhabited by cannibals. And Hudson Taylor said to him, "What do you want me to do?" And the captain said, "Well, I hear you're a man of God, and I want you to pray, and pray for wind." And Hudson Taylor says, "Well, all right. But I want you to put the sails up." And the captain said, "Well, my sailors will think I'm crazy, because there's absolutely no wind at all!" And Hudson Taylor insisted that he put the sails up. Thirty minutes later there's a knock on the door, and the captain is saying, "You can stop praying now, because we've got more wind than we know what to do with!"

Trust in God, but keep your powder dry. It's a matter of trust, at the end. You can make all the preparations in the world, but if you don't have trust in God they're going to fail.

My friends, where are you tonight in the Lord's army, in the warfare, in the battle, in this life that you and I have been called to live? Where are you tonight? Are you in the midst of a battle? Are you in the midst of a storm? Do you sense hostility and difficulty and opposition? You've made some plans...you've got a strategy...you think it looks good. You've asked counsel of friends; you've even prayed. But are you trusting in the Lord? Are you committing it all to the Lord? The Lord will fight for us. He'll never forsake us, because He never abandons us.

"We rest on Thee, our shield and our defender;
We go not forth alone against the foe.
Strong in Thy strength, safe in Thy keeping tender,
We rest on Thee, and in Thy name we go."

We're about to sing the words of this hymn:

"Onward, then, ye people, join our happy throng,
Blend with ours your voices in the triumph song;
Glory, laud, and honor unto Christ the king:
This through countless ages men and angels sing.

Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war,
With the cross of Jesus going on before."

Let's sing these words now to the praise and the glory of God. We'll pray first, and then we'll have the benediction, and then we'll sing this verse. Let's pray.

Father, we thank You for Your word. Hide it within our hearts. You know how prone we are to disbelieve even the things that sometimes we think we hold dear. Help us to trust Thee in every way. Hide Your word within our hearts, that we might not sin against You. 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. Amen.

[Congregation sings.]

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