

Nehemiah - The First Opposition

REVIEW: We have been studying through the book of Nehemiah. Just a quick recap: The first week we saw Nehemiah burdened for his country and his countrymen - people he probably never even knew. We asked ourselves the question, "What has God put on my heart as a burden?" I hope that you have not stopped praying for God to burden you with a mission, and how you can be involved.

In Nehemiah's life we have seen how he, in his leadership, has continued to pray. Through prayer (which is a proper understanding who God is, and who he is) Nehemiah plans. He steps out in courage to respond to God's call by speaking to the king, and even asking the king for supplies. When Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem, he continues the planning process, inspiring the residents.

Last week we watched as Nehemiah put his plan into action. He organized the workers to build near their homes. We looked at the variety of workers and equated some of this with the church. We are all one body, but have many parts - just like they had one big task, but many parts. We even looked at some of the gates of the city, and things they remind us of as 21st century Christians.

INTRO: A daughter complained to her father about how hard life is. "As soon as I solve one problem, another comes along."

Her father, a chef, took her to the kitchen. He filled three pots and set them on the stove, turning on the heat. As the three pots began to boil, the father threw carrots in one, eggs in the second, and ground coffee in the third, all without saying a word.

The daughter grew impatient, wondering what this was about. After a while, the father turned off the burners. He fished out the carrots and placed them in a bowl. Next the eggs and placed them in another bowl. Finally he strained the coffee and placed it in a third bowl. He asked her, "What do you see?"

"Carrots, eggs, and coffee." Dad brought her closer and asked her to feel the carrots. She said they were soft. "Now take an egg and break it." She saw it was hard boiled. Finally he told her to sip the coffee. She smiled and thought it was very rich in flavor.

"What does this mean," she asked. Her dad replied, "Each of these faced the same adversity - boiling water - but each reacted differently. The carrots when facing adversity went from being hard, to being soft. The egg was originally fragile, but became hardened inside. The coffee was very different, by being in the water, the coffee changed the water. Which are you?"

Today we meet a man that meets with opposition, and allows the Spirit of God to help him change the things around him.

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Nehemiah 4:1-23 (p. 478)

- I. We have met Sanballat before
 - A. He was the governor of the area and obviously threatened by Nehemiah showing up
 - B. Let's talk about why he was so threatened
 1. First of all, Jerusalem was a stop on some major trade routes
 - a) If Sanballat loses control of the area, it means he stands to lose money
 - b) Even if Jerusalem is a former shell of itself, the traders still pass through
 2. Second, Nehemiah is doing this with royal authority
 - a) So there is nothing that he can really do about it
 - b) If he incites an all out war against Nehemiah, he risks angering the king
 - c) If the king gets angry, there is no telling what might happen
 - C. There is a progression that is more obvious in the Hebrew than the English
 1. In chapter 2 Sanballat begins the mocking
 - a) He starts by asking if Nehemiah is going against the king because the order came 13 years earlier to stop work on the wall
 - b) No doubt, Nehemiah busted out his royal paperwork
 2. By chapter 4, Sanballat is really getting angry and opposing Nehemiah
 - a) Most likely because Nehemiah is succeeding
 - (1) Sanballat probably never really thought Nehemiah would get one brick off the ground
 - (2) And here it is and half the wall is up - Sanballat can't believe his eyes
 - b) He may have had an alternate agenda
 - (1) Ever notice that some people oppose others simple because they have a different agenda
 - (2) Take for example liberal groups in America that don't want Christianity "crammed down their throats"
 - (3) Yet they have no problem "cramming their agenda" down others throats
 - (4) This is one reason why opposition comes - and Christians can expect more of this the further our nation drifts from God
 - D. So Sanballat tries to discourage the workers by propaganda and ridicule
 1. It says that he did this in front of his associates and the "army of Samaria"
 - a) The problem is Samaria didn't really have an army

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- b) They had more like a militia for protection
 - (1) After all, the king wants to keep them strong enough to survive
 - (2) But not strong enough to revolt
- 2. “What are those feeble Jews doing?”
 - a) Truth - the Jews were feeble
 - b) And they knew they were
 - (1) So, Sanballat is playing on their fears
 - (2) Imagine someone intentionally picking on an area that you feel bad about yourself
 - (a) Your weight, your hair, your intelligence
 - (b) You are feeling timid, and when someone names it out loud and tells all around you about this perceived weakness, it is deflating
 - c) That is what Sanballat is doing - deflating them
- 3. “Will they restore their wall?”
 - a) In other words, these guys are feeble - they are weak
 - b) How will they restore the wall
- 4. “Will they offer sacrifices?”
 - a) In other words, “Are they going to resort to prayer?”
 - b) “It’s really the only hope they have.”
 - c) It was an attack on the Jew’s faith, which was weak already
 - (1) We all understand that - when someone attacks our faith
 - (a) Maybe over an area that we don’t have answers for their questions
 - (b) Maybe they play up every Christian stereotype they have ever heard to make you feel stupid - this is how the Jews are feeling
 - (2) Can you see with each of these the crowd around Sanballat laughing hard and harder
 - (3) It’s like comedy night at ruins
- 5. “Will they finish in a day?”
 - a) In other words, “Don’t they realize this is a HUGE task?”
 - b) More discouragement - it was a huge task, and Sanballat is just reminding them of how huge it was
- 6. “Can they bring the stones back to life?”
 - a) The city has been in shambles for years
 - b) While the fire probably did not weaken the integrity of the stones, they might look trashed, or weak, and they certainly would have been a mess to reconstruct
- 7. Finally Sanballat’s right hand man piles on, “Even if a fox climbed on it, the wall would break.”

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- a) They were probably thinking, “Even if you get this thing back up, it would take the tiniest of forces to knock it back down.”
- 8. This ridicule was probably very effective
 - a) The Jews were worn down from living in the area
 - b) They could get no traction in rebuilding their city - even having the king stop them years earlier
 - c) Their faith was weak, the task was huge
 - d) Sanballat knew how to tear them down
- II. Nehemiah’s response - 4:4-6
 - A. First thing to notice is he did not retaliate
 - 1. Retaliation is so easy
 - 2. Nehemiah could have stood on the rubble and shot back insults
 - a) “You’re not even a pure blooded Jew!”
 - b) “How dare you insult us when you haven’t had the vision enough to rebuild this city yourself!”
 - 3. For us that is easy too
 - a) Don’t believe me, watch any of the Presidential debates
 - b) It’s like a kindergarten class up there
 - B. Second thing Nehemiah did was, pray
 - 1. He was a pray-er so this is natural
 - 2. But it teaches us a good response to situations like this
 - 3. His prayer is similar to what we call imprecatory Psalms
 - a) Go to Psalm 69:23-28
 - b) Pretty harsh - we are Christians! We don’t pray like that!
 - 4. In Nehemiah, he says similar things
 - a) But Nehemiah’s motivation was the glory of God
 - b) They were laughing at and making fun of what God commanded them to accomplish
 - c) It was because the work of God was being insulted, not the workers
 - C. Third, they built the wall
 - 1. Ever get annoyed with someone that talks trash, and tries to tear you down
 - a) In Little League we faced a team whose catcher tried to get into everyone’s head when we came to bat - and it worked
 - b) At such a young age what we didn’t know was, the greatest way to shut the catcher up, is get up there at hit
 - 2. The greatest way to shut Sanballat and company up, build the wall - do what God called them to do
 - 3. And they did - to the point that they got half the wall up

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III. That is when Sanballat turned things up a notch and set his plans on violence - 4:7-23

A. What you may not get in a simple reading is who these groups are in verse 7

1. The Arabs are to the south
2. The Ammonites are to the east
3. The people of Ashdod are to the west
4. And Sanballat and his people are from the north
5. In other words, all the groups around Jerusalem are hearing that Nehemiah is succeeding in rebuilding the wall - and they are angry

B. They plotted to fight and stir up trouble

1. Probably not all out war - that would draw the king's attention
2. It was probably more like guerrilla warfare

C. Verse 9 is fascinating

1. We prayed to our God

- a) This seems to be Nehemiah's first step for everything
- b) Something happens - pray!
- c) This should be all of our first responses
 - (1) That does not mean a prayer meeting
 - (2) But pray - commit it to God

2. The second half of the verse is what I find fascinating

- a) They posted a guard - isn't that awesome!
- b) It was not a case of "we will pray, sit and do nothing, and God will save us"
 - (1) In fact, unless God specifically directs that they stand back and watch the might of the Lord
 - (2) I can think of no occasion in the Bible where doing nothing is the response to prayer
- c) Think about this for a minute
 - (1) We do not pray, "Please God, save my friend. Help them come to know and love you like I know and love you." and then do nothing!
 - (2) We do not ask God for healing and never see a doctor
 - (3) We do not ask God for healing in relationships, repairing our marriage, fixing a friendship, and then do nothing!
 - (4) We ask, we commit our actions to the Lord, and then we ACT!
 - (a) We act in the most sensible manner we can
 - (b) We trust that God will be with us as we do so

D. Next the rumor mill gets cranking - 10-12

1. The people are wearing out because the work is long and hard

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- a) No doubt the ridicule didn't help matters
2. The enemy threatens to sneak in and kill us
3. The enemy threatens to overwhelm and attack them
- E. Nehemiah places people by families at strategic spots along the wall
 1. Why would Nehemiah place them by families?
 2. Generally speaking, you fight harder when your family is at stake
 - a) When you are shoulder to shoulder with your brothers, you don't want anyone messing with your family
 - b) Unless it's that one crazy Uncle, then maybe use him as bait one day
 3. Does this not remind you of the church?
 - a) We are to be fighting, shoulder to shoulder with our brothers and sisters in Christ
 - b) When we love those we are fighting with, we fight harder
 - (1) And that is a hard part as Pastor - to help develop that kind of love between people in the church
 - (2) There should never be a person in this church that feels under supported
 - (3) They should all know that they have Christian family that has their back
 - (a) That is why I tell you that you need to be in a small group of some kind - life group, men's or women's bible study
 - (b) And don't go there and hide - let yourself be known
 - (c) Quick story - I was visiting with my long time friend from Chicago
 - i) His daughter has had some struggles which we have discussed in the past, and I asked him what was going
 - ii) He gave me the update, and when he was done, I saw another problem that my friend did not bring up, so I asked him about it
 - iii) He was silent for several good seconds, and I thought, "Oh no, I pushed to far. The non-parent offering parenting advice"
 - iv) Finally he said, "I never thought of that. I will have to talk with my wife about that so we can keep an eye on things."
 - v) We know each other well, and can challenge each other
 - vi) That is what it is like to be known and cared for - for another brother to be watching your back
- F. Nehemiah reminds them that God is awesome - so fight for your families
 1. The motivation is twofold - We serve a great God
 2. And fight for your families and your home

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3. Their enemies found out they were aware of this plot
 - a) God was given the credit for frustrating the plot
 - b) Notice that Nehemiah did not try to take the credit - it was God's doing
 - c) Then they returned to their work
- G. At this point the workers were armed and ready if needed
 1. Half did the work and were still armed
 2. The other half were standing guard
 3. Nehemiah knew that because they would be spread out along the wall with only half the previous workforce, they needed a way to call for aid
 - a) He kept a trumpeter with him
 - b) He informed the others, if you hear the sound of the trumpet, come running to fight - trusting that God would win the day, regardless how much the enemy threw at them
 - c) In HS/College I worked at Kmart
 - (1) There was a certain code they would announce over the speakers that meant, "All available associates willing to fight to..."
 - (2) I remember just finishing a transaction just as that code was announced
 - (a) The people probably thought I was nuts because I handed them their change and receipt and took off running for the front doors of the store
 - (b) Just so you don't think you have some daredevil pastor, by the time I got there, there was one person running across the parking lot with clothes falling behind, and one already on the ground in an arm lock
 - d) Again, this really should be a picture for the church
 - (1) That when the trumpet is sounded, we come to aid
 - (a) Aid in the fight for helping someone overcome addiction
 - (b) Aid in the fight to help in relationships
 - (c) Aid in the fight to help financially, or medically, or whatever the case may be
 - (2) When that trumpet is sounded, it may mean a call to prayer
 - (a) Pray for those in need
 - (b) Pray for your brothers and sister
 - (c) Labor in prayer - not just a simple "Hey God, so and so needs this, thanks"
 - (d) Work hard at the practice of prayer
 - e) And the other picture of the church that comes out of this story is working together for a common goal

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- (1) Its almost like putting on the full armor of God
- (2) We are seeking to accomplish a task
 - (a) Their's was rebuild the wall in hostile territory
 - (b) Our's is building the kingdom with Christ while in hostile territory
 - i) There is a pastor in NC whose church consistently grows
 - ii) When they work out the stats on the growth, 70% or more are people that come from unchurched backgrounds - not sheep swapping
 - iii) We need to work to be growing, and be growing by seeing new people come into the kingdom
 - iv) He has a book called *Rise of the Nones* - James Emery White
- (3) Not only do we have each other's backs for defense, but we realize that we are put here for a higher calling
 - (a) We are not just trying to make it in this world
 - (b) We are here to accomplish the task God has given us
- f) Nehemiah's words are words to us as well - "Our God will fight for us!"
 - (1) God did not give us the task, place us in hostile territory and leave us
 - (2) God will fight for us - He is with us in the building of the kingdom

IV. Application

- A. How are you handling the enemy?
 1. Are you discouraged?
 2. Are you ready to give up in life? In marriage? In work?
 3. Have you not noticed, or perhaps you did not realize you have your brothers and sisters in Christ to help you in the battle?
- B. How are you doing in our common mission?
 1. We were sent to build the kingdom
 2. Or are you so focused on the enemy's ploys that the mission has become lost? Or the mission is secondary to survival?
 3. When it comes to the mission, let me leave you with Jesus words
 - a) I'm going to read these slowly so you can savor and slowly let them sink in
 - b) Luke 9:24-25 "Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?"