

“Working and Warring”

Nehemiah 4

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Nehemiah 4

¹ Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews. ² 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?” ³ 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!” ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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.

⁶ So we built the wall. And all the wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work.

⁷ 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. ⁸ And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it. ⁹ And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night.

¹⁰ 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.” ¹¹ And our enemies said, “They will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work.” ¹² At that time the Jews who lived near them came from all directions and said to us ten times, “You must return to us.” ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ 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.”

¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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, ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built. The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ In the place where you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us.”

²¹ So we labored at the work, and half of them held the spears from the break of dawn until the stars came out. ²² 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." ²³ 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.

Introduction

There are many reasons why we face difficulties in life. Human beings, in our sinful nature, want glory and want to be God. But according to the Bible, glory, praise, and worship belong to God. And it is incredibly beneficial because when He receives it, everything becomes right, and everyone benefits from it.

As we look at Scripture, Satan also wanted glory. He wanted it but lost the battle through Jesus Christ's death and resurrection. According to Revelation 12, he's very angry and wants to get back at God, but since he knows he cannot win, he tries to hinder the glory of God. He has orchestrated this world so that our hearts are tempted by it. We want to live for our glory rather than the glory of God. Satan is working behind all these things.

The Bible addresses this conflict both obviously and subtly. In Job, the battle is obvious because Satan comes out, and he is trying to lure people away from God. In Esther, it's not obviously. God's name is not even mentioned. But as Haman tries to kill the Israelites, and God uses Esther to save them, we know that the battle exists. In Nehemiah, Satan's name is not mentioned, but obviously there is a spiritual battle going on. Sometimes it is obvious, sometimes it is not, but in all three books God and Satan are at work. This is true throughout the Bible and our lives.

We think sometimes if we do God's will there will be no opposition. Even though it was God's will for Nehemiah and the Israelites to build the wall, He did not remove the opposition. In fact, the opposition increases in the next three chapters. But if you respond properly, the opposition will drive you to greater dependence in the Lord and to greater determination to what God has called you to do. There is no winning without working and warring. There has to be war, but there also has to be work.

I. Problems- Watch perceptively [1-3, 7-8, 10-12]

In these verses, we see seven types of opposition. Get used to these oppositions because you will encounter them at some point in your life.

A. Anger [1, 7]

People were angry at Nehemiah and the Israelites. Sanballat, the governor of Samaria, was furious his power and economic gain was threatened. If the Israelites became stronger, they would obviously be at loss. The Hebrew word for anger is "burning mad" - not just annoyed. Often, anger means, "I want what I want!" or "I'm not getting what I want!"

***Ephesians 4:26-27** - Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.*

You might be angry at times, but do not sin. Do not let your anger dwell. Learn to resolve it. In the midst of anger, Satan can use our desires and thought patterns to hinder the glory of God, so we need to be cautious.

B. Mockery [2]

In this passage, we see mockery and ridicule. Sanballat and his friends gather within hearing distance of the wall and ask a series of sarcastic questions. Mockery is effective because it is demoralizing. It strikes the hidden insecurities that everybody has. They ask five rhetorical questions to stimulate the Israelites' insecurity.

1. **What are these feeble Jews doing? Insecurity of who they are**

2. **Will they restore it for themselves? Insecurity of what they can do**

3. **Will they sacrifice? Insecurity of their religion**

Sanballat was denying that God was going to help His people.

4. **Will they finish up in a day? Insecurity of a deadline**

This question suggests that the Jews didn't know how difficult the task was and would soon call it quits.

5. **Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, and burned ones at that? Insecurity of their resources**

The stones they were using were taken out of rubbish heaps and were old and damaged.

Things people say may hurt us, but they can never harm us unless we allow them to poison our thinking process and stimulate our desires. If we spend time pondering the words of the enemy, we give Satan a foothold from which he can attack. The best thing to do is to pray, commit to the Lord, and get back to work. Anything that keeps you from doing what God has called you to do will only help the enemy. When the enemy laughs at what God's people are doing, it is usually a sign that God is at work. God is in the process of using you and helping you grow.

Psalm 2:4 – He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision.

When we are weak, He is still strong. So we are strong because He is always with us.

C. Confusion [8]

We are living in between the Promise and the Promised Land. The path that He leads us through is not always what we expect, so there will be confusion. Get used to the normality of confusion in Christian life. It's not abnormal for Christians to be confused.

D. Threat [8, 11-12]

These enemies had to be careful because Nehemiah was working under the permission of Artaxerxes, the most powerful person at that time. They couldn't just rally their troops and

march on Jerusalem because they would be charged with rebellion against the king. Similarly, Satan can do something against us but not everything he wants to do because God gave us permission to serve Him. They used threats of violence, which they circulated among the Jews living near them. Small, unidentified bands of terrorists snuck in and picked on a few people working on the wall. Sanballat could tell Artaxerxes that it was a renegade that he didn't have control over. Satan uses threats and intimidation to oppose us who want to live faithfully for God in our daily lives.

E. Discouragement [6, 10]

Notice that the attack comes when the wall is halfway built. Often, danger comes when things are halfway done. Satan knows this timing is effective because when you start something new you're excited, but after some time things might get tough. Somewhere down the line, the newness and freshness of commitment wears off, and you begin to notice the piles of rubble in your own life. You begin to grow weary, wondering if your efforts are making any differences for the cause of Christ. Your weariness leads you to discouragement, and discouragement is a key weapon in Satan's arsenal.

F. Negativism/Pessimism [12]

Negativism came from the Jews who lived near the enemy. They weren't personally involved in the work, and so did not know what God was doing firsthand. But they were influenced by hearing negative reports. Someone close, who only slightly understands you, might say such things constantly. The Hebrew expression of "ten times" means "over and over." Negativism is the enemy of faith.

There is negativism, but there is also realism. How can we make the distinction? In Numbers 13 twelve spies are sent to the land of Canaan. Ten spies say, "*Wow! There are giants in the land, and we are like grasshoppers in their sight!*" But the other two, Joshua and Caleb, say, "*We know they are big, but we can conquer!*" Ten spies were near the enemy and were distant from God. When this happens you are in great danger, wrong thoughts come in, and opposition looks big. The enemy's sayings become logical, their voices get louder, and their tone becomes attractive.

But Joshua and Caleb are realistic. They are close to the enemies, but they are closer to God. They knew that the enemies were big, but they knew that God was bigger. This is the reality of Christian life. Whenever you're close to the enemy, make sure you're closer to God.

G. Fear [11, 14]

Fear is the cumulative effect of all of the above factors. Fear is a form of self-love and self-protection. There's nothing wrong with self-protection, but often, the motive is for us. Sometimes we have fear of failure, rejection, or conflict. Fear of failure shows your love for success. Fear of rejection shows love for acceptance. Fear of conflict shows love for the approval of man. They are all forms of self-love, and we need to overcome our fears with love for others and love for God, who is greater than our fears. Nehemiah was not afraid of the enemy. When he saw that his people were starting to be afraid, he acted.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt said, *“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”* Fear paralyzes you and is contagious. Fear and faith cannot co-exist in the same heart. Make sure you overcome your fear with faith. This is how Nehemiah responds to opposition. Not retaliation, but facing it head on.

1 Corinthians 15:58 – Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

You have the resurrection power of God in you, and it will help you go through your problems.

II. **Power- Walk prayerfully [4-6, 9, 14]**

A. **Pray [4-6, 9]**

Prayer should be our first response to opposition. As we look at Nehemiah’s prayer in these verses, we like it because he is praying for God to get rid of the enemy. What can we learn from this? You can be honest in your prayers; God can handle it. And as you interact with God, God changes your heart.

This is not a prayer for personal vengeance. In the Book of Psalm, we call these types of prayers “imprecatory psalms” – they ask for God to exercise justice. These are not seeking personal vengeance, but they are asking God to judge sinners because they are working against His glory. They are prayers for God to exercise justice so that His work will not be hindered. Because they are praying for the glory of God, it is implied that they are praying for repentance. They are praying for the expansion of God’s kingdom, so repentance and coming to the Lord is implied in these kinds of prayers.

We see that Nehemiah and the Israelites are praying, as he uses the word “we” in verse 9. They lifted their voices in prayer. Often our first response to opposition is to get angry and defend ourselves because we have fleshly reflexes. We need to have spiritual reflexes. The spiritual reflex is to get down on our knees and cry out to God.

John Bunyan wisely said, *“You can do more than pray, after you have prayed, but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed.”* Pray first. Prayer reminds us that God is sovereign, even over those who are attacking us. He has allowed trials for a reason, and prayer reminds us of that. In prayer, we submit our hearts to Him and acknowledge our trust in Him.

B. **Focus [6]**

When it says, *“the people had a mind to work”* in verse 6, it literally means the people had a heart to work. They didn’t allow the enemy’s threats to hinder their focus. Pretty soon the enemy was looking up instead of directly at them because the wall was getting higher.

Always learn to focus on the important things that you cannot give up in your life. Even when you fail, keep on serving and doing the right thing. If you wait until you are perfect, you will never do anything, because you’re not going to be perfect until Jesus returns. Don’t

wait until you're completely healed – keep on being a wounded healer. God's strength is greater than your pain.

C. Worship [14]

Nehemiah tells them *“Do not be afraid”* and to *“Remember the Lord”*. The best way to dispel fear is to remember the Lord. God is greater than our enemies and God is greater than our fear.

James 4:7 – Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

No circumstance, hardship, difficulty, human being – not even Satan himself can do anything against you if you submit to God. When opposition hits, it's easy to focus on your problems, but keep your mind focused on the Lord.

This little phrase, *“Remember the Lord”* implies that He is already with us. Nehemiah is not requesting the presence of the Lord, as if He is distant. You have to know that He is already present with you.

III. Progression- War productively [13-20]

Nehemiah had many hats: he was a cupbearer, contractor, and captain of an army of the Israelites. A good leader utilizes his gifts well; an exceptional leader utilizes others' gifts well. The best leader develops hidden potential in others, and together they achieve maximally. Great spiritual leaders utilize the power of God to do all of the above and expand the kingdom of God. This is exactly what Nehemiah does, as he makes the following seven adjustments.

A. He stopped the work [15]

The Israelites stopped for a while to make adjustments. Sometimes we need to do that.

B. He armed the people [13]

Nehemiah turned Jerusalem into an army camp with swords, spears, and bows.

C. He arranged the people into family groups at vulnerable parts of the wall [13]

The *“lowest parts”* and *“open places”* were the most vulnerable areas of the wall. Nehemiah arranged them by clans because he knew that they would fight most fiercely when the lives of their own families were in jeopardy.

D. He encouraged them [14]

Nehemiah tells them not to be afraid.

E. He divided the people into two groups as workers and warriors [16-18]

Half of them were warriors that watched, and the other half was working. But even workers had weapons in their hands just in case they had to fight.

F. He devised a plan for an unexpected attack [18-20]

If they heard the sound of the trumpet, they were to use their weapons because it meant that the enemy was coming.

G. He accelerated the pace of the building [21]

-Nehemiah 4:17 - 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.

They prepared for war, but did not stop working. In fact, they increased the pace of their work. Sometimes you have to lose sleep to continue the work of God. Fight, but don't stop serving. They had a weapon in one hand, but a work spreadsheet in the other. They prayed, but they also studied. Work and war together. There is the sovereign power of God but also human responsibility – we have to do our part. Nehemiah prayed first, and then he set up a guard.

Notice that Nehemiah's prayer did not make the enemies go away. Instead, the enemies increased their threat to attack. Just because you're doing all of these things does not mean your enemies will back down. Nehemiah also instituted a second shift, which required workers from out of town to stay in Jerusalem at night to help guard the city. He inspected the city's defense every night and made sure the guards were on duty.

Why do people quit? I believe one of the main reasons is because they do not view what they do as their calling – they do not have a sense of purpose. If we view what we do within the framework of our calling, I believe we would persevere. Why? Because there is no other option for believers in Jesus Christ. And this is not based on feeling. Ask any mom if they feel like being a mom all the time. They have no other option – it is their innate calling. His calling always comes with enablement, especially for those who pray. Any progression with His grace is advancing his kingdom. Keep on going.

IV. Perseverance- Work purposefully [21-23]

When Nehemiah told the people to *“pass the night within Jerusalem”*, he was telling them to stay and not go home. They slept with their clothes on because they had to get up and fight. Josephus, a Jewish historian, writes that Nehemiah, *“himself made the rounds of the city by night, never tiring either through work or lack of food and sleep, neither of which he took for pleasure but as a necessity.”* Nehemiah kept on going both night and day.

I've been preaching at CFC for 27 years, and there has always the temptation to not preach. During the first year, my first child was about to be born. Saturday night was a crucial time to prepare sermons, but my wife's water broke on a Saturday night, so I had to take her to the hospital. I don't remember much about the following Sunday, but I preached. I also preached through the week of my father's funeral. If it's something you're called to do, you have to keep on going. Always ask yourself, *“Is it my calling? Is the purpose of it for the glory of God?”*

Christian life requires grit and toughness – it demands courage. We can seek the ability to do things, but sometimes the best ability is availability – the courage to say yes. Where does this courage come from? Courage rests upon the assurance of God's presence in your life. God never calls us to do anything apart from Him. His calling is a statement of His presence in your life, which is also known as God's anointing. As you pray, He's going to anoint you with His power.

Nehemiah was courageous because he depended on God. When we go to the Lord, our hearts, though filled with fear, can increase in love for God and for others. Our love for His kingdom must exceed our desire for self-protection. We do not need to seek a different or better place to be. With Him, any place will become better because of you. God is in you, and God is going to use you. Always be courageous in responding to the challenges of the day. Wisdom is not the absence of weakness but knowing your weaknesses. Know who has the strength to help you. Resolve to be workers and warriors for the kingdom of God.

-Psalm 57:7-8 - My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast! I will sing and make melody! Awake, my glory! Awake, O harp and lyre! I will awake the dawn!

David prayed this in a cave as he fled from Saul, the most powerful person in the nation. He prayed this in the midst of opposition and hardship. We have to be men and women of prayer because you receive vision and calling when you pray. Almost every chapter in the book of Nehemiah includes prayer. He was capable, and he knew King Artaxerxes. But instead of talking to the king, he prayed to God. As the bricks were piling up, prayers were being stored up. People who have God's power in their lives bring God wherever they go. Make sure you have dignity as you pray in the morning. Go to work and say, "*I'm bringing God to this place.*" And that place will be a better place because of you. Take God to the spheres of your calling.

Conclusion

I believe that one of the callings of CFC is to wake up this city. We pray that Christians all around the world would have power to expand the kingdom of God. Bring God to the place of your calling. May this church awake our community every morning for the glory of God.