

SCRIPTURE LESSON TEXT

NEH. 4:1 But it came to pass, that when Sanballat heard that we builded the wall, he was wroth, and took great indignation, and mocked the Jews.

2 And he spake before his brethren and the army of Samaria, and said, What do these feeble Jews? will they fortify themselves? will they sacrifice? will they make an end in a day? will they revive the stones out of the heaps of the rubbish which are burned?

3 Now Tobiah the Ammonite was by him, and he said, Even that which they build, if a fox go up, he shall even break down their stone wall.

4 Hear, O our God; for we are despised: and turn their reproach upon their own head, and give them for a prey in the land of captivity:

5 And cover not their iniquity, and let not their sin be blotted out from before thee: for they have provoked thee to anger before the builders.

6 So built we the wall; and all the wall was joined together unto the half thereof: for the people had a mind to work.

7 But it came to pass, *that* when Sanballat, and Tobiah, and the Arabians, and the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites, heard that the walls of Jerusalem were made up, *and* that the breaches began to be stopped, then they were very wroth,

8 And conspired all of them together to come *and* to fight against Jerusalem, and to hinder it.

9 Nevertheless we made our prayer unto our God, and set a watch against them day and night, because of them.

NOTES

Nehemiah Combats Derision and Danger

Lesson Text: Nehemiah 4:1-9

Related Scriptures: Nehemiah 2:9-20; 6:1-15;
Psalm 123:1-4; I Peter 5:6-10

TIME: 445 B.C.

PLACE: Jerusalem

GOLDEN TEXT—"Nevertheless we made our prayer unto our God, and set a watch against them day and night, because of them" (Nehemiah 4:9).

Lesson Exposition

ENEMY MOCKERY—Neh. 4:1-3

With this lesson we jump ahead several hundred years and land in the period that followed Judah's seventy-year Exile in Babylon. In fact, we find ourselves at a point nearly a century after the first group of returnees from Babylon arrived back in Jerusalem. That happened, according to accepted reckoning, in 536 B.C. under the leadership of Zerubbabel. After a rough start, the Jews managed to rebuild the temple (cf. Ezra 3:1—6:15) and much of the city. Jerusalem's walls, however, still lay largely in ruins.

It was this sad fact that greatly distressed Nehemiah when it came to his attention during a visit by a delegation from Jerusalem (Neh. 1:1-4). Nehemiah was serving at the time as the chief cupbearer to the Persian king Artaxerxes (1:11—2:1).

The position of cupbearer was one of great honor and responsibility, and the bad news from Jerusalem created an awkward situation for Nehemiah. Nevertheless, he obtained permission

from the king to lead a fully authorized support mission to the Judean capital. Nehemiah's aim was to rebuild the city's broken-down wall and repair its defenses and prestige (2:1-7).

Outraged shock (Neh. 4:1-2). We first meet Sanballat in chapter 2. He is called "the Horonite" (vs. 10) and apparently was the leader of an influential ethnic group in the region of Judea. He is often mentioned in tandem with Tobiah the Ammonite and Geshem the Arabian (2:19; 4:7; 6:1). Together, these leaders and their peoples constituted a formidable force that rose up in opposition against Nehemiah and the Jews.

Sanballat and his allies had scoffed at the plan to rebuild when they first heard of it (2:19), imagining that the efforts would quickly amount to nothing. But now that actual progress had been made (extensive details are given in chapter 3), he reacted in shock and indignation. "He was wroth" (4:1), and he launched a tirade of mockery.

Sanballat carried out his rant in the presence of "his brethren and the army

of Samaria” (vs. 2). This is most likely a reference to close friends and allies, including a number of Samaritan army officers.

We can practically see Sanballat pacing back and forth, crying out in frustration, “Just what do these feeble Jews think they are up to? Do they really imagine they can rebuild their defenses? Do they think offering their sacrifices will help? Do they expect to finish it in a day?” Sanballat was incredulous that such a task was being accomplished.

Unbridled sarcasm (Neh. 4:3). Sanballat’s associate Tobiah the Ammonite was at his side and now chimed in with some choice ridicule of his own. He may have been trying to calm down his agitated friend, for he employed what he no doubt saw as a bit of shrewdly pointed humor. Tobiah voiced his considered opinion that the new wall the Jews were building was so fragile that even a fox could knock it down just by walking on it.

The sarcastic appraisal evidently reached the ears of the Jews and Nehemiah. This undoubtedly was by design, intended as a way of discouraging the workers and derailing the rebuilding program. But because God had a faithful man in charge, the mockery had exactly the opposite effect.

PRAYER AND PERSEVERANCE— Neh. 4:4-6

Prayer for vindication (Neh. 4:4-5). It is interesting to speculate on what the response of God’s people might have been like in today’s terms. If Nehemiah had had a Twitter account, he might have shot back with an inflammatory tweet of his own. Instead, Nehemiah took the matter to God.

“Hear, O our God; for we are despised” (vs. 4). Some English translations add an “us” after “hear,” but it seems more likely Nehemiah was saying something like, “God, do You hear

what they’re saying about us?” This was not a placid, lofty prayer intoned in hushed, reverential calm. Nehemiah was upset; he was agitated. He had a right to be angry, and he did exactly right in not hiding it from the Lord but voicing it honestly before Him.

Nehemiah launched directly into his complaint: “we are despised.” He was telling God, “They’re mocking us!” He hated it that all the hard work his people had put in up to this point was being made the butt of a scornful joke. They deserved better. And so that is exactly what Nehemiah requested: “Turn their reproach upon their own head.” The Hebrew for “reproach” is stronger than what the English word might convey. Nehemiah wanted his adversaries’ scorn, their taunts, to boomerang back on them.

He strengthened this thought by adding the request that the taunters would become captives in a foreign land themselves. “In the land of captivity” does not specify a particular country; Nehemiah merely wished that the mockers would get a taste of the captivity that his own people had endured not so long before.

The one thing Nehemiah did not want was to see the mockers’ actions get swept under the rug. This is brought out forcefully in the plea “cover not their iniquity” (vs. 5). Their wickedness needed to be exposed—brought out into the light and dealt with. Nehemiah emphasized the point by asking God not to blot out their sins. In other words, he pleaded, “Don’t let them get away with this!”

We fully sympathize with Nehemiah’s frustration, but was he right to utter such a prayer that sounds so uncharitable? For those of us familiar with Jesus’ teaching to love our enemies and to “pray for them which despitefully use you” (Matt. 5:44), it can seem improper or unspiritual to pray against forgiveness for others. Why

did Nehemiah utter such a prayer?

Before going too far, however, it should be noted that such prayers are not absent from the New Testament. Galatians 1:8-9, II Timothy 4:14, and Revelation 6:10 are just a few examples. We need to briefly consider the godly purpose behind such requests.

First, Nehemiah was asking for immediate help in a difficult situation. The wearying work of rebuilding was in danger of coming to a halt if the enemy taunts were allowed to sap the people's morale. Second, the taunts of Sanballat and company were not harmless fun; they contained threats. Nehemiah recognized the peril and called on God to turn it back on them. Finally, the mocking did not merely make fun of the people's efforts; it impugned the honor of God. In asking for God to deal with it, Nehemiah was praying for God's glory to be upheld.

Progress on the wall (Neh. 4:6). Nehemiah's prayer was answered in the most telling way: the work went on, proving the emptiness of the enemies' taunts. The entire wall around the city was "joined together," that is, linked up in a unified structure "unto the half thereof." The builders had managed to restore the entire wall to half its original height.

ENEMY THREATS AND MORE PRAYER—Neh. 4:7-9

Rage and plotting (Neh. 4:7-8). Not surprisingly, when Sanballat and his cronies heard that the building was going ahead despite their taunts and that the gaps were being systematically filled in, they were furious. The time for mere mockery was over; now they were going to have to do something about it.

The enemies made plans together to march on Jerusalem and stop the rebuilding effort by force.

Prayer and watchfulness (Neh. 4:9). The response of Nehemiah and his people to this new threat is wonderful in its simplicity: "Nevertheless we made our prayer unto our God." They did not panic or react in anger themselves. They simply brought the matter back to God.

Yet their dependence on God did not allow them to be lackadaisical or neglectful of their own responsibilities. From this point on, they "set a watch," that is, posted a twenty-four-hour guard, against any enemy activity. This was exactly the precaution they needed to take.

Our text ends here, leaving us hanging somewhat as to the final outcome. But there is no doubt that the rebuilding would go on. Fifty-two days after the whole effort had begun, the wall was finished (vs. 15).

—Kenneth A. Sponsler.

QUESTIONS

1. What three leaders allied against Nehemiah?
2. What made Sanballat react in anger?
3. What sarcastic opinion did Tobiah voice about Jerusalem's wall?
4. What did Nehemiah do when he heard of the mockery?
5. What did Nehemiah want God to do with the enemies' taunts?
6. What did he not want God to do?
7. How was Nehemiah's prayer answered?
8. How did the enemies react to the continued progress in rebuilding?
9. How did Nehemiah and his people react to the new threat?
10. What additional step did they take after praying?

—Kenneth A. Sponsler.

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. God's people can expect opposition when they are doing God's work (Neh. 4:1).
2. God's enemies underestimate His power and the strength of His love for His people (vs. 2).
3. The best way to respond to threats is always with prayer (vss. 3-5).
4. United perseverance in God's work fights off the discouragement our enemies seek to sow (vs. 6).
5. Threats, confusion, and discord are tools Satan uses to hinder God's work (vss. 7-8).
6. We defeat the devil's plans when we stay connected to God in prayer and stay alert to the enemy's schemes (vs. 9).

—Cheryl Y. Powell.

RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

1. What was the relationship between Israel and Samaria? Why would Sanballat of Samaria have been angered when he learned of Israel's progress on the wall?
2. What tactics did Sanballat use to interfere with the rebuilding of the wall (cf. 6:1-15)?
3. How does the example of Nehemiah inspire or encourage you in the face of opposition in your life and work?
4. What can we do today so that we do not lose faith and give up in our service to the Lord?
5. What is the relationship between prayer and preparation? Why would Israel "set a watch" (4:9) if they had already prayed?

—Cheryl Y. Powell.

Golden Text Illuminated

"Nevertheless we made our prayer unto our God, and set a watch against them day and night, because of them" (Nehemiah 4:9).

As Nehemiah recruited helpers and began to rebuild the wall, several enemies sprang up to antagonize Nehemiah and his people.

Many would not be able to handle this kind of intense pressure if they were in Nehemiah's shoes. Yet that pressure is the context behind the golden text, which begins with the word "nevertheless." Even though Nehemiah was in a threatening situation, his response was prayer and trust in the Lord.

Nehemiah continued to trust in the Lord despite his circumstances, and cried out to Him for help, even when the protection God provided was not evident from a human perspective. He was bound together with his brothers in the faith through prayer, and they were emboldened by the Lord.

Nehemiah and his fellow servants of the Lord felt the weight of persecution, but they did not let it stop them from obeying their calling to serve the Lord. They had already given up everything to serve Him, and they continued to trust Him, even in the presence of violent threats. Nothing could stop them from serving the Lord.

Today's believers should emulate Nehemiah's strong faith by investing themselves in God's work in whatever settings they find themselves. As His children, they can devote themselves to prayer and trust Him no matter what as they work to advance His kingdom.

—Carissa Dobson.