

Labouring For the God Who Fights For Us

Nehemiah 4

Winston Churchill is one Britain's most recognised and influential Prime Ministers. He is of course well known for his inspirational speeches, his strategic leadership during World War 2, and he even won a Nobel Prize in literature.

But did you know he was also a bricklayer. At his Chartwell house south of London, Churchill spent 8 years laying thousands of bricks as tall as 8 feet high for a garden wall. It was for him, a relaxing hobby. He would spend up to 5 hours a day laying bricks – even getting his daughters to pass them to him!

It was for him peaceful and enjoyable. Often photographed with trowel in hand and cigar in mouth. He described brick laying as a therapeutic and satisfying hobby. A picture that I hope you picked up from our reading, could not be further from the experience of building in Nehemiah 4.

From a leisurely and relaxing build, trowel and cigar, to discouraged builders, trowel in one hand, sword in the other; constantly under threat from an angry enemy for Nehemiah and God's people.

And such a contrast in meant to be in our minds. Last week in chp 3 we finished with a beautiful picture of God's people working together in harmony, side by side to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem. Men, women, and children; upper and lower class; perfume makers and priests.

The people work together, the sun is shining, the wall is going up after over 140 years of lying in ruins. It's an encouraging, exciting, and beautiful moment. But it all comes crashing down as angry opposition arises in chp 4 that threatens to stop the work and discourage the people.

How will they keep going? What will God do to or for his people when opposition threatens to take away their resolve and willingness to live for him? And I hope you can see that question is equally important for us today, as those loved and saved by Jesus and called to seek first his kingdom.

As we heard last week, the rebuilding of this wall was about the safety and identity of God's people. It provided protection, enabling them to live as God's distinct and separate people. Because at the heart of Jerusalem was the temple. These are God's people, living under God's rule, in God's presence.

And so their rebuilding the wall was far from a hobby but an expression of their faith. Their determination to live as God's people shaped by God's purposes. We'll see that clearly in chps 8-12 as the wall is finished, the priority is to gather to hear God's Word read and applied to their lives; they confess their sins and need for forgiveness and they commit themselves to live his way.

And so this is rich book to help us, as those who are saved and forgiven by Jesus, to take responsibility and invest in God's building project – which is not about bricks and mortar but people. The Lord Jesus is building his church, calling all people to repent and believe and find life in him.

And as we find life in Jesus we then build our life on Jesus, being conformed in every way to his will for our lives. To participate in his kingdom plans and purposes in the world: to build the church by evangelism; making Jesus known, and to building up the body of Christ as we serve each other.

And yet consistent in Nehemiah and all of Scripture is that as you invest in God's kingdom purposes in the world, opposition will follow. It's not a matter of if it will but what form will it take.

As Jesus says in John 15: ¹⁸ *"If the world hates you, understand that it hated me before it hated you... 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. I hope it isn't a shock to you that being a Christian is unlikely to make you popular or raise your status in the workplace. Opposition, persecution, cost is expected. Part of the package deal. And the danger for us will always be to avoid or minimise that cost; or to compromise or just give up when it comes.*

We need to remember and be aware that as Jesus' people we are always caught up in a spiritual battle. Ephesians 6: ¹¹ *Put on the full armor of God so that you can stand against the schemes of the devil.* ¹² *For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this darkness, against evil, spiritual forces in the heavens.*

As we participate in God's building purposes we have an enemy. A scheming enemy. We will need to stand. Listen to how Paul puts it Philippians 1: Our goal is to *live worthy of the gospel of Christ... standing firm in one spirit, contending together for the faith of the gospel not being frightened in any way by your opponents (Phil 1:27-28).*

So how will we do that? How will we keep going, remain faithful in the face of opposition? Well that's what Nehemiah 4 has for us today. This whole chapter is structured around three occasions when the enemies of God's people hear what is happening in Jerusalem and act to discourage or stop it.

In v.1, v.7, and v.15 Sanballat and his unmerry men hear of progress on the wall, are enraged, and take action. We will get a taste of how the devil schemes against God's people – which is going to ask us if we are prepared, what are we expecting to face as God's people? But at the same time, it will also encourage us as we see God's provision to keep going.

Opposition will come, and often it will come in the form of ridicule and mockery – which is what we see in **point #1 (vv.1-6)**. Sanballat showed up in chp 2, and much like Gollum following the ring, he's has been tracking what Nehemiah and the Jews have been doing...

Firstly, he was displeased by Nehemiah's intention to rebuild wall (2:10), then he called them traitors (2:19) but now that the wall is progressing in 4:1, he is enraged. Furious in fact - so gets his mates or colleagues together to mock and ridicule the Jews with some choice words in v.2.

He questions their strength: *"What are these pathetic Jews doing? Can they restore it by themselves?*

And their ability or capacity for the job: *Will they offer sacrifices? Will they ever finish it? Can they bring these burnt stones back to life from the mounds of rubble?"*

Then there's exaggeration in v.3, Tobiah joins in to question the quality of their work: *"Indeed, even if a fox climbed up what they are building, he would break down their stone wall!"* Which given excavations have shown the wall was about 9-foot thick, it would have to be an impressive fox!

But their intent is clear: the job is too big for you; you are too weak, no one wants it anyway. And these are choice words because as we'll see in v.10, these are insecurities the people had already.

And slander, mockery, ridicule is a frequent part of the weaponry of the devil that we should expect if we are faithful, being shaped by the gospel and contend for the faith. We should expect that, because God's kingdom priorities are so at odds with the world around us – living God's way will often make us look weak or foolish or even offensive in the eyes of others (cf. 1Cor 1:27).

So mockery is not unexpected, but not enjoyable either. So how should we respond? Well what does Nehemiah do? Throw back some insults of his own? No. As he so often does, he prays.

⁴ *Listen, our God, for we are despised.* Nehemiah goes to God. His prayer highlights how impactful the insults and ridicule really are. So he turns to God, casts it all on him. Yet what he prays may shock us.

Make their insults return on their own heads and let them be taken as plunder to a land of captivity. ⁵ *Do not cover their guilt or let their sin be erased from your sight, because they have angered the builders.*

Now Nehemiah is not seeking personal vengeance. His prayer is for justice and judgement on sin. He knows their mockery is seeking to derail God's plans and purposes; he wants God to act, to not let them succeed. His prayer reflects a high value on God's work and what it means to oppose it.

This is one of several imprecatory prayers we find in the OT (Ps 5, 35,137; Jer 18:18-23). And although we might ask valid questions like what about Jesus' call to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, we should pause feel his urgency, desperation, and longing for God's justice.

And while as Christians, yes, we have been shown a better answer to evil in Jesus, we can learn here from Nehemiah to look to God, not ourselves, for vindication. To, in the words of Romans 12, not take revenge and remember that God will avenge and repay as the just judge. He is not indifferent to evil.

But especially we must learn from Nehemiah to turn to God in prayer so that we do not for a moment, accept the world's verdict and low assessment of what we are doing as we live for our God. Prayer is powerful because it makes God big and puts everything else in perspective.

The resources we need to keep going are realised through prayer – Nehemiah knows this, prayer is an instinctive response for him throughout this book. Prayer is God's means to change us. As Tim Keller says: "Prayer turns theology into experience. Through it we sense his presence and receive his joy, his love, his peace and confidence, and thereby are changed in attitude, behaviour, and character."

That's what we see in v.6. Ridicule ringing in their ears they keep going. ⁶ *So we rebuilt the wall until the entire wall was joined together up to half its height, for the people had the will to keep working.*

They keep building. Not to be discouraged himself, when Sanballat hears of their progress he is again furious so he ups the ante to threats and intimidation which takes us to our **second point in vv.7-14.**

Anger is best done in company so we read that Sanballat is again joined by the Tobiah, but also the Arabs, Ammonites, and Ashdodites. That is, all the nations that surround Judah at the time. They are outnumbered, boxed in, under threat as their enemies plot to come and fight against them in v.8.

And is often the case, threat and intimidation easily lead to discouragement. In vv.10-12 we hear enthusiasm has been replaced by despair. ¹⁰ *In Judah, it was said: The strength of the laborer fails, since there is so much rubble. We will never be able to rebuild the wall.*

The job before them is enormous and they are mostly unskilled, fatigue is affecting morale. But they aren't just weary, they are vulnerable to attack. In v.11 they sense that at any time their enemies can just come and kill them. Those who are travelling to build the wall are especially of concern in v.12, so they plead repeatedly, ten times over, give up the work, return to us, don't go back.

The rebuild is at breaking point, discouragement has set in, and the people want to withdraw. And I don't think I've met a Christian who hasn't gone through a season of real discouragement. Whether it's mocking or exclusion in the workplace, debilitating physical health, a lack of growth in our holiness, loved ones rejecting the faith or walking away from Jesus, personal rejection for sharing the gospel, a lack of ministry fruit, or just the recurring awareness of your own inadequacies.

It can come from a careless word from a friend or just too much time listening to our own thoughts. Discouragement is never far away and throw in some opposition, some ridicule or threats, and the desire will easily be to retreat or just give up. So how are we to respond? How can we keep going?

In v.9 Nehemiah models the vital balance we need to press on in faith: prayer meets diligent action. ⁹ *So we prayed to our God and stationed a guard because of them day and night.*

The story isn't merely repeating. As the opposition escalates so does the response. While Nehemiah prayed in v.4, now the whole community does. They pray together and take precautions especially at the vulnerable areas of the wall in v.13 so the work will continue. They pray and station a guard.

Some might want to push back and say well if they prayed, shouldn't they trust God enough not to need to station the guard? Shouldn't they not need to if God really is in control? Or conversely, doesn't stationing the guard suggest they aren't confident God will answer them. Well no.

They are modelling to us the balance between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. They are avoiding the error of self-reliance that doesn't pray, and the sin of lazy apathy that takes no action.

This counteracts both panic and paralysis which might be an important corrective for some of us. Prayer and action, faith and diligence are not opposing options for the Christians but must work together. They station the guard because they are confident God is with them and at work (see this again in v.20). – it's an expression of their faith and desire to not give up but keep going.

And we see this as Nehemiah urges them to remember their majestic God. ¹⁴ *After I made an inspection, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials, and the rest of the people, "Don't be afraid of them. Remember the great and awe-inspiring Lord, and fight for your countrymen, your sons and daughters, your wives and homes."*

Don't be afraid. Remember the great and awe-inspiring Lord. Now that might not seem overly profound and yet it's what we need to do more than anything else. 2Timothy 2:⁸ *Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel.*

Remember your awesome God. Don't look at the opposition and their threats; don't look at the enormity of the job; don't be overwhelmed by all that could go wrong and you can't achieve, look at God and all that he can achieve for he is great and awesome.

He can bend the will of a king; he can part seas and stop the sun; he can use whole nations to achieve his purposes and the very best efforts of his enemies to bring salvation. Which we have seen especially in the coming of Jesus – not simply his power or sovereignty, but his love.

Jesus who can raise the dead, heal the sick, and calm the storm is our gentle and lowly saviour who goes to the cross for us, taking the punishment of death we deserve, to forgive us our sins and clothe us in his righteousness. The living Lord Jesus who has conquered death and gives us life to full.

The Lord who tells us to remember that his death is for us as we are about to do in the Supper. Look to him, remember him, and you'll have all you need to keep going in faithful vigilance. There is no greater comfort for our easily discouraged hearts; no greater motivation for our temperamental wills in the face of threats than to remember our great, awe-inspiring, and loving Lord Jesus.

Again that might not surprise you, may not sound that profound, and yet that might just be because we are often so content with a small view of Jesus. That over time we somehow convince ourselves that the height, depth, width, and length of love of Christ is not unsearchable; not that big after all.

Dane Ortlund's 'Gentle and Lowly' is easily the most helpful book I've ever read. He says, "The Christian life boils down to two steps: 1. Go to Jesus. 2. See #1. Whatever is crumbling all around you in your life, wherever you feel stuck, this remains, un-deflectable: his heart for you, the real you, is gentle and lowly. So go to him. That place in your life where you feel most defeated, he is there; he lives there, right there, and his heart for you, not on the other side of it but in that darkness, is gentle and lowly. Your anguish is his home. Go to him. "If you knew his heart, you would.""

How wonderful this beautiful reality will be preached to our senses shortly in the Supper. Remember Christ. And as we do that, Nehemiah says we will have all we need to fight. As we'll see in v.16f that meant literally taking up sword, spear, and bows for God's people rebuilding the wall in Jerusalem.

But as we heard earlier, our fight is not against flesh and blood but against spiritual attack. In Eph 6 the sword we are to take up is the word of God – to trust it and live by it. Revelation 12 also describes this spiritual battle as the devil rages against the church. ¹⁷ *So the dragon was furious*

with the woman and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring—those who keep the commands of God and hold firmly to the testimony about Jesus.

The fight for a Christian is to be faithful to the word of God in all seasons of life, in the face of discouragement and opposition. And as we remember our God, not just his power but his goodness to us, his love and mercy poured out in the cross, we are sustained and kept to be faithful.

As Paul says in 2Timothy 4:7 *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.* And we need to be sustained because faithfulness in the face of opposition will be costly and uncomfortable which is made clear in vv.15-23 (**point #3**).

For the third time the enemies *hear* that despite their efforts progress on the wall continues. God has frustrated their attempts: the enemy is frustrated but not removed. Opposition remains. Sanballat and his unmercy men will pop again in an attempt hinder or stop progress in Nehemiah.

And although it might surprise us or not be what we want to hear, God's provision for his weary and oppressed people to keep going to not to take away the opposition, nor the removal of obstacles & hardship. His provision is the courage and resolve to press on through them as they remember him.

So often I think we feel that if God is in control, if God wants to something to happen, the oneness is on him to remove the obstacles or difficulty in order for us to be faithful. But that is just not the case. God's means for our perseverance is not the removal of everything hard or difficult!

We can and should accept responsibility to live for God's kingdom purposes whatever may come because in him we have all we need for life and godliness. And we need to hear that because it might mean the Christian life is not as easy, comfortable, and straightforward as we might have expected.

We see that in Nehemiah don't we as they know the threat is still against them and take radical action to ensure it doesn't stop them from progressing in their God-given task. 6 times in vv.15-23 we are told they did the work. But *how* that work continued is uncomfortable and kind of shocking.

- v.16 + 21 Half did the work of rebuilding while the other half held spears, shields, bows, and armour.
- v.17 They carried the materials in one hand and the sword in another.
- v.18 The builders who needed both hands to work had their sword on side instead.
- v.19 They spread out because the work is enormous but Nehemiah carries a portable alarm with him, a person with a ram's horn that if blown, they are drop everything and come to fight.
- v.22 They no longer travel but stay in Jerusalem meaning less danger on the road but less time with their families or at home.

Which is especially huge as they work in v.21 from daybreak until the stars come out – that's a massive day of sword carrying labour. And the cherry on top? After working hard and sweaty all day they go full boys-cabin on camp mode as they don't even take their clothes off to wash.

Now there is a danger when we read this kind of story that we can think it's kind of quaint and lovely as it's often depicted in kids books. But I hardly doubt it was all smiles. Imagine the risk assessment on this build! Not to mention the first aid room priests & perfume makers wield swords all day!

While their perseverance is inspiring I think you'd agree it hardly feels idyllic: working night and day, heavy labour, sword in hand, not returning home, and the constant awareness that the horn could blow and they were under attack.

It feels extreme, costly, deeply uncomfortable, and I wonder if it feels to you all just a bit unnecessary. Surely this is not what is expected right? And yet the consistent answer has been that God's provision to keep going is not the removal of hardship but the means to keep going in the face of it.

And we need to pause here because our natural instinct is to resist and avoid this. We want life to be comfortable and conflict free; we naturally avoid conversations, situations, or people that will rob us of that. And I think we know how often we find it easy to justify or allow compromise and retreat.

And so I think we are meant to take two things from Nehemiah 4. Firstly, discomfort, hardship, opposition, are to be expected as we give ourselves to being shaped by the gospel.

1Peter 4: ¹² *Dear friends, don't be surprised when the fiery ordeal comes among you to test you, as if something unusual were happening to you.*

When Paul describes his experience as a follower of Jesus he uses the word danger 8 times, toil and hardship, going without food and clothing, constantly under pressure. In his letters written from prison we find not a single prayer request that he'd be released but that he'd be faithful in there!

And although it might be shocking to us, this is the fairly normal experience of so many believers around the world. A few years ago we had a girl join youth group who had just moved here from Egypt. Her father was an Anglican minister and just taken up a role here.

She said she was so happy to be here because there had been four attempts to kidnap her and siblings on the way to school in the last year. When I met her dad and asked him about it he said it was the normal experience of several pastors to pressure them to give up their role and faith.

All around the world believers are facing pressure to give up, severe discomfort to gather in secret during the night, the constant vulnerability of losing their employment, their freedom, or even their life for their faith in Jesus and determination to live for him.

So while we might recoil at the costliness in Nehemiah 4, for so many of our brothers and sisters in Christ are living in this reality daily. And so we need to ask if we are expecting this, prepared for this, and persevering through this by remembering our God.

Peter Adam tells the story of receiving a mission update from a persecuted church in the Middle East. Their prayer request stood out to him. "Please do not pray for us. If you pray for us you will

pray for our safety... Please pray *with* us – if you pray with us you'll pray that millions will be converted and we'll bear the persecution that follows trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ."

Which is the second thing we should see here: perseverance is worth it when you know your God.
²⁰ *Wherever you hear the sound of the ram's horn, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us!"*

Much like v.9, confidence in God is met by action. Not God will fight so don't worry about it. Fight because our God fights for us. Confidence in God never makes us passive but enables us to give ourselves wholeheartedly to his kingdom purposes in the world.

And as we live this side of the cross, we know more. Not simply that God will fight for us, in Jesus we know our God has fought for us. That our Lord Jesus has triumphed over sin, the devil, and the grave in his death and resurrection. That he has forgiven all our sins and given us living hope.

Romans 8:³⁵ *Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Can affliction or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?* ³⁶ *As it is written: **Because of you we are being put to death all day long; we are counted as sheep to be slaughtered.*** ³⁷ *No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.*

More than conquerors not because we never face these things, but because we are not defeated by them. That we are safe, secure and loved through them.

And so if you are not yet a follower of Jesus here this morning, it might surprise you to hear that the promise and expectation of a life that follows Jesus will actually increase your discomfort. Set your life on a different priority, an eternal perspective that will make you look foolish in the eyes of our world.

And yet at the same time, it's a life that is richer than we can grasp. A life of trusting and living for Jesus who has fought for us, who loves us and has made us his own, who has a better answer to evil and suffering and given us an eternal hope as he calls us to be part of his purposes in the world.

In 2023, Winston Churchill's wall was leaning and in danger of collapse – significant time and money was invested fix it due to weak foundations and 'amateur bricklaying'. Many criticised it calling it a waste of money on what was ultimately a waste of time.

And yet we should be confident that will never be us no matter the opposition or criticism that may come our way. That because He is the risen and reigning King, who has conquered the grave forever, we know our work for him is never a waste.

⁵⁷ *But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!* ⁵⁸ *Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the Lord's work, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. (1Cor 15).*

Let's pray.