

Mounting Opposition

Nehemiah 4:1-6

Nehemiah 4:1-6 - *“But it so happened, when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, that he was furious and very indignant, and mocked the Jews. ² And he spoke before his brethren and the army of Samaria, and said, “What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they fortify themselves? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they complete it in a day? Will they revive the stones from the heaps of rubbish—stones that are burned?” ³ Now Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, “Whatever they build, if even a fox goes up on it, he will break down their stone wall.”*

⁴ Hear, O our God, for we are despised; turn their reproach on their own heads, and give them as plunder to a land of captivity! ⁵ Do not cover their iniquity, and do not let their sin be blotted out from before You; for they have provoked You to anger before the builders. ⁶ So we built the wall, and the entire wall was joined together up to half its height, for the people had a mind to work.”

Background Notes

In Nehemiah 4, enemies were attempting to stop the Jews from rebuilding the city wall around Jerusalem. The time period was back in the 5th Century BC. The Jews had returned from their 70-year captivity in Babylon. Under the leadership of Nehemiah, a great and godly leader, they were finally rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem.

Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian armies had destroyed the city walls when they conquered Jerusalem in 586BC.

Opposition to the wall building was mounting from the surrounding provinces. Two of them are mentioned here: “Samaria” and “Ammon.” Along with Judah, these areas were provinces under the rule of the Persian Empire. Samaria and Ammon didn’t want the province of Judah to become stronger and more significant in the Persian Empire, because all kinds of advantages would begin to move toward the province of Judah, including economic supremacy and trade routes.

The opposition that we saw on the horizon in chapter 2 was now growing, and the first form of it was ridicule and sarcasm.

By the way, the Bible first mentions the Samaritans in Nehemiah 4:2. The Samaritan people began about 300 years before this time when the Assyrian Empire conquered northern ten tribes of Israel in 722BC. After conquering the northern kingdom of Israel and the capital city of Samaria, the Assyrians repopulated the northern area with captives from foreign lands, and these peoples brought their own pagan religions to their new country. Eventually, because of intermarriage with the few Jews who were allowed to remain there, the Samaritan race began, and a new system of worship developed. At Nehemiah’s time the Samaritans were living in the area north of Judah that was now a Persian province named Samaria.

The friction and enmity between the Jews and Samaritans continued right on down to the time of Christ. Remember how our Lord reached out in grace to the Samaritan woman in John 4? There we read that *“the Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans.”* Also, the woman spoke of worshiping on “that mountain” - not Jerusalem. Samaritans still live in that same area today, and continue to worship on Mount Gerizim.

Verse 2 mentions that many of the building blocks from the old city wall could not be reused because they had been “burned.” How can you “burn” a piece of stone? Well, we’re talking about limestone here, and when limestone comes in contact with intense heat it crumbles. The calcium carbonate turns to lime, and it crumbles. In fact, when the Roman armies attacked Jerusalem in 70AD, they built fires under the arches built by Herod the Great. When the keystone of the arch crumbled because of the intense rising heat, the arch collapsed. The same thing happened when the Babylonians conquered the city of Jerusalem and set it on fire. A number of the large blocks of limestone in the city wall were ruined and couldn’t be reused.

Doctrinal Points

1. There will always be opposition to the work of the Lord.

The enemy gets active when he sees any work of the Lord prospering. This account of the opposition to rebuilding the physical wall of Jerusalem is certainly meant to illustrate the enemy’s opposition to spiritual wall building. Ephesians 6:12 says, *“We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.”*

Any time we’re involved with spiritual wall building and becoming stronger as Christians, we can **expect opposition!** One of the first forms of opposition will be ridicule and sarcasm from unbelievers, and that’s enough to stop a lot of Christians from spiritual wall building.

What do you do when you get ridicule and sarcasm like this? You do exactly what Nehemiah did. You **pray**. And you **continue to build**.

That’s exactly what took place here - and it worked (v6)! Half the wall was built! And praying about the problems brings us to the second doctrinal point.

2. Imprecatory praying is biblical.

The word “imprecatory” comes from “imprecate,” and the meaning of imprecate is “to invoke the opposite of a blessing.” So imprecatory praying is praying that your enemies will not succeed, and that they will not prosper. You’ll notice that is exactly what Nehemiah prayed: *“Hear, O our God, for we are despised; turn their reproach on their own heads, and give*

them as plunder to a land of captivity! Do not cover their iniquity, and do not let their sin be blotted out from before You” (v4-5).

Is that the way we should pray today? How can we explain this prayer in light of Matthew 5:44, where Lord Jesus tells us to love our enemies, and to pray for those who persecute us? How can we line up Nehemiah’s prayer with our Lord’s prayer on the cross, *“Father, forgive them for they know not what they do”*?

The same kinds of questions can be raised about the “Imprecatory Psalms.” In a number of psalms the psalmist actually prays that nothing good – and even evil - will come upon the enemy of the Lord’s people.

Some Christians say that Nehemiah was wrong – that he shouldn’t have prayed like this – that this is just a record of him praying wrongly. I don’t think that’s the answer. Other Christians say that Nehemiah was right in the way he prayed, but this prayer is in the Old Testament. They say that Nehemiah was not yet living under the period of grace, like people in the New Testament.

However, I think there’s more to the answer than that. I want you to notice that Nehemiah wasn’t praying this way because he was jealous, or because he was angry that someone was getting ahead of him in the business world. No! He was praying this way because the glory of God and the work of the Lord were at stake. The same is true of the imprecatory psalms. They were not about personal grudges. Those prayers were based on divine justice and God’s standards being upheld.

This is also true of our Lord’s prayer on the cross. His prayer was in reference to what had personally been done to Him. Compare that with what our Lord said, *“Woe unto you, Scribes and Pharisees.”* That “woe,” or judgment, was pronounced on the Jewish leaders who opposed the Lord’s ministry, because the work of the Lord was in view there.

Imprecation is not foreign to the New Testament. In Galatians 1:8-9, the apostle Paul said: *“If anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.”* That’s imprecatory! And 1 Corinthians 16:22 says, *“If anyone does not love the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be accursed.”* In addition, the entire book of Revelation involves imprecatory thought.

There is a proper place for imprecatory prayers today. Here’s an illustration. Suppose I was praying about the cults that deny the deity of Christ. I might pray something like this: “Lord, may they see the error of their ways and stop taking away from your glory with this demonic doctrine. May they turn from their false doctrines and acknowledge Jesus as fully God. But if not, may their efforts be thwarted and overturned. May they not prosper. May your glory never cease. May your righteous standards be maintained forever by their eternal punishment.”

There’s a lot more we could say about imprecatory prayer, but the doctrinal point is this – in the proper context, imprecatory praying is biblical.

Practical Applications

1. Expect to be ridiculed as a Christian.

If you don't hide the fact that you're a Christian, you can be sure you're going to be mocked and despised. It's bound to come! What do you do?

A few years ago a woman was sitting next to me on a plane, and the conversation went well until it turned to spiritual things. After I shared my faith in Christ, she said she couldn't believe that intelligent people still believed those kinds of things! That was direct mockery.

What do you do in a situation like that? Do exactly what we see here – **pray, and continue to build** your spiritual wall. Don't throw in the towel. Don't quit just because of a little ridicule. Ridicule is to be expected! Bring it to the Lord in prayer, just as we see here. Don't bottle up your feelings of frustration or grief – take them to the Lord! Find your refuge in Christ - and continue to build!

2. “Your best defense is a good offense!”

You've probably heard that comment in reference to football. Continuing to score points is your best defense against losing the game!

And Nehemiah did this. He didn't delay. He didn't take time out to show why it wasn't nice to ridicule. He didn't turn around and insult the opposition. **He just continued to build!** And by verse 6 the wall was already half up!

So don't let ridicule stop you or delay your perseverance in your spiritual growth or in the work of the Lord. Continue to pray and to study scripture, and continue to be involved in Christian service. Don't taper off because of a little mockery, ridicule or sarcasm.

Your best defense is a good offense!