

Prayer and Precaution

Nehemiah 4:7-9

Nehemiah 4:7-9 – *“Now it happened, when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites heard that the walls of Jerusalem were being restored and the gaps were beginning to be closed, that they became very angry, ⁸ and all of them conspired together to come and attack Jerusalem and create confusion. ⁹ Nevertheless we made our prayer to our God, and because of them we set a watch against them day and night.”*

Background Notes

Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians had destroyed the city wall of Jerusalem back in 586BC. Now, about 104 years later, the Jews were rebuilding the wall under the godly and dynamic leadership of Nehemiah. The rebuilding was going on under the auspices of the Persian Empire, which was in power at this time. Judah was a province of the Persian Empire, and King Artaxerxes I had appointed Nehemiah to be governor of Judah.

In Nehemiah 4:6 we learned that Nehemiah and the people of Judah had built the wall to half its height. However, the surrounding Persian provinces didn't want Jerusalem and the province of Judah to become strong, because all kinds of advantages would then shift towards Judah – including trade and commercial profits.

So opposition to the rebuilding of the wall around Jerusalem was beginning to increase, because the enemies were not pleased that Nehemiah had returned to rebuild Jerusalem's walls (chapter 2). The enemy began by mocking and ridiculing the Jews, but the building of the wall went forward in spite of these early stages of opposition.

However, by chapter 4 the enemies were really angry, and they increased the opposition by going beyond ridicule. They conspired to attack Jerusalem, and thus to cause doubt and uncertainty. Verse 8: *“All of them conspired together to come and attack Jerusalem and create confusion.”* They wanted to stir up trouble - to do whatever it would take - to stop the wall building.

Notice that the enemy had gained some reinforcements. We've already read about the Samaritans (under Sanballat), and Ammon (under Tobiah), and the Arabs - but now we see a fourth enemy force – the people of Ashdod (v7). Ashdod was one of the Philistine cities along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, where the Gaza Strip is located today. Under the Persian Empire, the area around Ashdod was a province, and the city of Ashdod was the district capital.

Notice that the enemy opposition was now coming from all directions: Sanballat and the Samaritans from the north; Tobiah and the Ammonites from the east; the Arabs from the south; and now the Ashdodites coming from the west. The enemies were trying to close in and attack Jerusalem.

What was the reaction of Nehemiah and the Jews? They did three things: **they prayed, they set a watch, and they continued to build!**

Doctrinal Points

1. Satan's tactics are the same in every age.

We've already mentioned that every tactic of the enemy in the book of Nehemiah represents a tactic of Satan, the enemy of our souls. As opposition continued to increase against Nehemiah and the Jews who were building Jerusalem's walls, so opposition will increase as our spiritual walls are built today.

First will come ridicule and scorn - but before long there will be open threats. As an example, look at the theory of evolution. I'm convinced that the root and source of the theory of evolution is satanic. Look around at all the evidence for God's created world - yet in evolutionary theory, all that evidence is reinterpreted to take God out of the picture. Simply stated, the theory of evolution claims that everything started with a "big bang," and then with time and natural processes, we have the universe, the Earth, and all the life forms that we know today.

In the early days of the creationist movement, the unbelieving world (that held the theory of evolution) was not worried about "creationists." Creationists were mocked, ridiculed, laughed at, and considered to be naïve. They posed no threat. But now things are different. Creationists have continued to "build the wall" – defending the biblical account of creation! They now present a solid scientific case for biblical creation. They have produced documentaries and videos and books, and even made some inroads into the school system. They have rebuilt what appeared to be a ruined wall of belief in creation and the accuracy of the Bible.

So the enemy has increased its opposition. The form of opposition is now greater than just ridicule and scorn – it now is open conspiracy! Legal action is taken against teachers and school boards and institutes that teach creation. Creationists are pushed out of their jobs, and denied teaching opportunities in schools and universities.

That's what was happening in Nehemiah 4. At first the opposition was low key - scorn, ridicule, and laughter. But as the building went on and the wall grew stronger, opposition increased. In the same way, creationists were mocked, ridiculed, and scorned, but now that they have begun to build a pretty solid wall, the opposition has increased.

Any church or ministry that's growing should watch out! If it has already weathered the storm of scorn or ridicule, somewhere along the line opposition to a thriving ministry will increase. Open threats and even legal actions may be taken.

Don't for a minute think that this opposition is just by chance. This is satanic strategy, and it is seen right here in Nehemiah. God's Word is teaching us that Satan's tactics are the same in every age.

2. Prayer and precaution go together.

What did Nehemiah do in the face of this opposition? He prayed, and he continued to build! And - he also set a watch against the enemy (v9). After all, enemies surrounded him on every side.

Notice that Nehemiah did not just pray. Prayer alone would have been to presume upon God. Yes, God wanted Nehemiah to pray, but He expected Nehemiah to **do** something as well. Prayer is not a substitute for action. **Prayer and action go together.**

Setting up a watch in addition to prayer is not evidence of a lack of trust in God, nor is it evidence of a small, weak faith. Being watchful is another means that God has given us to fight the enemy. The Bible teaches that prayer and precaution go together.

Nehemiah prayed, and he set up a watch. And he continued to build the wall. It wasn't that he didn't have enough faith that the Lord would protect them. No! God expects prayer and precaution to go together.

Practical Applications

1. Be prepared for increased opposition.

As we continue to build our spiritual walls, we need to be prepared for increased opposition. Many of you may be beyond the ridicule stage. If so, hang tough. Don't quit. The opposition will increase, so be prepared.

At this point some Christians may say, "Why continue building? If the opposition increases the more we build up our spiritual walls, then let's just taper off a little! Why face opposition?" Some Christians have decided to follow this policy, and their Christian lives have been a washout. Their weak spiritual walls couldn't withstand the enemy's attacks and temptations. They played right into the enemy's hands.

Do you want your life as a believer to be a failure? If your spiritual walls are weak, a test of your character is all it will take to stop you. But as you stand and fight in the face of increased opposition, you will be strengthened - and God will be glorified!

It really does pay to hang in there. Be prepared for increased opposition. When it comes, don't quit. Stand fast. You'll be strengthened, and God will be glorified.

2. Make sure you watch as well as pray!

Watch and pray. Both are important!

Back in verse 4 it looks like Nehemiah was praying a public prayer on behalf of all the people: "*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!*" But in verse 9 everyone was praying: "*We made our prayer to God, and... we set a watch against them.*"

We all need to pray more! You've probably heard the expression: "Satan trembles when he sees the weakest Christian on his knees." Prayer is very important. But we also need to set a watch. As well as praying, we need to watch out for the enemy's attacks. Jesus told His disciples, "*Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation*" (Mark 14:38). It's very important that we not only pray, but that we also keep a careful watch for the enemy's attacks.

1 Peter 5:8 says that Satan prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. Satan will always attacks us at the weak areas in our spiritual walls - and he knows where our walls are weakest. Maybe we're vulnerable in the area of wanting more money - or maybe it's envy of people who already have more money. Maybe it's desire for success or prestige - even in ministry! Maybe it's weakness in the area of sex or pornography. Satan knows where we're vulnerable, and he'll do his best to get a foot in the door. We need to be aware of our weak areas. We need to watch as well as pray.

In addition, Satan will seek to discredit our Christian testimony. A number of years ago, a woman called me and asked for Christian counseling. I was about to agree when she said she wanted to meet in a very unique place - in a field! That didn't sound right, so I asked her to come to our home instead. My wife, Margie, would be there, and she might have some counseling insight as well. No, the woman didn't want to meet there. After talking to Margie and giving it some prayer, I asked her again to come to our home - but she didn't come. I never found out what was at the back of her mind, but I do know this: we've got to be extremely careful of "*the devil's schemes*" (Ephesians 6:11). Verse 9 says that they "*set a watch against them day and night.*"

Make sure you watch as well as pray!