

Nehemiah 4:1-23 (ESV)

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.

Nehemiah 5:1-19 (ESV)

¹ Now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers. ² For there were those who said, "With our sons and our daughters, we are many. So let us get grain, that we may eat and keep alive." ³ There were also those who said, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses to get grain because of the famine." ⁴ And there were those who said, "We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields and our vineyards. ⁵ Now our flesh is as the flesh of our brothers, our children are as their children. Yet we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but it is not in our power to help it, for other men have our fields and our vineyards."

⁶ I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words.

⁷ I took counsel with myself, and I brought charges against the nobles and the officials. I said to them, "You are exacting interest, each from his brother." And I held a great assembly against them ⁸ and said to them, "We, as far as we are able, have bought back our Jewish brothers who have been sold to the nations, but you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us!" They were silent and could not find a word to say. ⁹ So I said, "The thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies? ¹⁰ Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us abandon this exacting of interest. ¹¹ Return to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the percentage of money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them."

¹² Then they said, "We will restore these and require nothing from them. We will do as you say." And I called the priests and made them swear to do as they had promised. ¹³ I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, "So may God shake out every man from his house and from his labor who does not keep this promise. So may he be shaken out and emptied." And all the assembly said "Amen" and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised.

¹⁴ Moreover, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes the king, twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the food allowance of the governor.

¹⁵ The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people and took from them for their daily ration forty shekels of silver. Even their servants lorded it over the people. But I did not do so, because of the fear of God.

¹⁶ I also persevered in the work on this wall, and we acquired no land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work. ¹⁷ Moreover, there were at my table 150 men, Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us. ¹⁸ Now what was prepared at my expense for each day was one ox and six choice sheep and birds, and every ten days all kinds of wine in abundance. Yet for all this I did not demand the food allowance of the governor, because the service was too heavy on this people.

¹⁹ Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people.

Nehemiah is a book with insights for us into restoration, renewal, leadership, and God's faithfulness.

Read Nehemiah 4:1-23
(Questions for later personal reflection)

10. What tactics were the opposition attempting to use to undermine the work on the wall? How did they respond when the work went on?
11. How does Nehemiah respond? What measures did he take to counter them?
12. Why are vs 6 and vs 14 – 15 key verses?

It is a literary pattern in Nehemiah's account, beginning in Chapter 2 that each step forwards in the narrative is marked by a reference to the opposition of Sanballat and his colleagues. As the enemies hear of progress being made, they amplify their efforts to disrupt the work being undertaken. Then Nehemiah responds to their tactics and threats and encourages his people. (note 2:10; 19; 4:1-3; 7-8; 15, and the further conflicts in chapter 6.) There is a growing intensity in the struggle. The nature of the opposition was intimidation. How much of it was real and how much psychological – aimed at discouraging and demoralizing the workers. Note Vs 15 – but they did not let down their guard.

It can be noted that the workers in Jerusalem felt very vulnerable and insecure. They were surrounded by a coalition of foes – Sanballat and the Samaritan forces to the North, Geshem and the Arabs to the South,

Tobiah and the Ammonites to the East and the Philistines of Ashdod to the West. At verse 6, they have reached the halfway mark. As the work progressed they were fatigued, doing double duty as watchmen, and dealing with a lot of fear and uncertainty. Vss 11,12 And some of the workers had homes and families in the surrounding villages.

Again we see Nehemiah's balance between trusting a Sovereign God and taking responsible measures as well. Vs 9; 14; 15; 20.

Nehemiah's prayer in vss 4-5 has been compared to both the laments and the imprecatory psalms. Harse, but God's will towards those opposing Him is clear. Nehemiah's prayers stand out, but it is significant in vs. 9 that now "we prayed...." Corporate threats are met with corporate prayer!

Read Nehemiah 5:1-19
(Questions for later personal reflection)

13. Just when external threats are at their strongest, internal problems erupted as well. What were these and how did they come about?
14. Whom did Nehemiah confront and what was his solution to the problem? What kind of personal example did he maintain?
15. Does this passage speak to any modern social concerns and how?

Social issues were a significant part of Nehemiah's concerns. There were tensions between those who remained in Judah, and those who returned and resettled in the days of Zerubbabel, and those who came more recently with Ezra, along with the issues of those who had inter-married with the local pagan population. There were those who were wealthy and many who were poor. The book of Nehemiah is a book about God renewing a city and a community. In this situation the problem was an exploitation of Jews by fellow Jews. On top of a famine and hunger were exploitative interest demands, foreclosed mortgages and enslavement. While so many were volunteering to help in the work, this issue could bring the entire project to a standstill at a moment when unity is so needed. A similar crisis would threaten the early church in Acts 6:1ff.

At the heart of this chapter is Nehemiah and his character. His reaction to the great outcry of the poor is anger (vs 6), but he responds with self counsel (Vs 7) before confronting the officials responsible - first face to

face, and then in a public assembly (because it is a public matter). He follows the biblical pattern of conflict resolution: Eph 4:25-32; Matt 18:15-17. Internal problems usually go beyond the immediate matter and other emotional and relational issues erupt as well.

Mosaic law was being disregarded in this situation – Exo 22:25; Lev 25:35-4. God's law is intended to help the needy and provide equity. Note that lending money is not condemned here (vs 10)– but excessive interest charges which were harming not just individuals, but the whole community.

Vs 9 sets an important principle – God's honor before the world is at stake here. Nehemiah sets himself up in contrast to his predecessors, in solidarity with his people. Despite having a large group of officials to support (Vss 17-18 is interesting), he refused the allocation (vs 14), while devoting himself to the work on the wall, working alongside the rest (4:21, 23), and avoiding any potential conflicts of interest (vs 16).