
Sermon Notes

October 3, 2015

First Congregational Church of Pomfret

The Way Forward: When Your Efforts Are Opposed

Nehemiah 4:1-23

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." ...

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...

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.

Just When You Thought...

- ❖ Nehemiah's initial efforts are met with favor and approval
 - granted royal permission to return to Jerusalem
 - granted governmental resources
 - granted authority
 - granted protection
 - granted a "green light" from his countrymen
- ❖ Just when it seems everything is going along smoothly, Nehemiah is met with a surge of opposition
- ❖ Satan never bothers with halfhearted people or churches, but if you come out "on fire" for Christ, look out!

A Brief Background

- ❖ Because of her sin, idolatry and rebellion, God causes Israel to be held captive in Babylon for 70 years
 - 538 BC—Babylon is conquered by Persia
 - 536 BC—Cyrus, king of Persia makes a proclamation allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem (Ezra 1:1-3)

- ❖ 520 BC—the foundation of the second temple is laid
 - 516 BC—the second temple is completed
 - Jerusalem’s infrastructure is in poor condition
- ❖ 458 BC—Ezra leads a second wave of returning exiles to Israel under the direction of the Persian king, Artaxerxes
 - Ezra teaches people God’s Word and God’s ways
 - Jerusalem’s infrastructure is still in poor condition
- ❖ 445 BC—Nehemiah goes to Jerusalem to deal with the deplorable conditions that exist because the city’s walls remain broken down and her gates remain in ruins

Facing Opposition... Then

- ❖ Since Sanballat and his followers are not able to instigate a military campaign against Jerusalem, they resort to harassment, mockery, sarcasm, threats, and intimidation
- ❖ Nehemiah’s extraordinary leadership
 - he keeps the work force focused and faithful
 - he gets busy praying
 - he prioritizes prayer
 - he prays honestly
 - he shows the great synergy that exists between prayer and action (4:9)
- ❖ John Bunyan: “You can do more than pray, after you have prayed, but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed.”

- ❖ Nehemiah keeps directing the people’s hearts and thoughts up to God (4:14, 20)

Facing Opposition... Now

- ❖ How do we balance prayer and preparation for battle?
- ❖ Staying “armed” AND “prayed up” for battle (Ephesians 6:12-18)
 - our tendency to minimize prayer is so dangerous
 - to disregard prayer is to discard our primary weapon
 - the power of God is released in prayer
- ❖ Persevering prayer and perseverance in the Christian life does not guarantee us what the world labels “success”

Personal Application

1. What kind of criticism or opposition is most difficult for you to endure? Why is this the most difficult for you?
2. What do you most appreciate about Nehemiah and the Israelites in this chapter? Why? What lessons or principles do you see for your own life?
3. Did you ever feeling like giving up on a project or a person? What motivated you to stick with it? How can we encourage a friend who feels like “giving up”?
4. How can you know the difference between legitimate rebuke and ungodly opposition?
5. Does Satan use believers to oppose God’s work? If so, how?