

Working Faith on a War Footing

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[0 : 00] Now, let's turn to our Bible reading. We're reading this morning from the book of Nehemiah, continuing on. So if you turn to page 400, it's Nehemiah chapter 4, verse 7 to the end of the chapter, page 400 in the Blue Church Bible, beginning in verse 7.

Now, when Samballat 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 and they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it. And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night. 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. And our enemies said, they will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work.

At that time, the Jews who lived near them came from all directions and said to us 10 times, you must return to us. 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. 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. 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. From that day on, half of my servants worked on construction and half held the spears, shields and bows and coats of meal. And the leaders stood behind the whole house of Judah 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 on the other. And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side whilst he built. The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me. 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. In the place where you hear the sound of the trumpet rally to us there, our God will fight for us. So we labored at the work and half of them held the spears from the break of dawn until the stars came out. 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.

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.

[3 : 34] Well, if you would turn with me to Nehemiah chapter 4 and the passage we read together. A passage all about working faith on a war footing.

The book of Revelation, the apocalypse, is really rather neglected in the church or else often it's left to those who are rather obsessed with end-time prophecies and rather outlandish interpretations. But the word apocalypse or apocalyptic has therefore become one with rather frightening connotations, hasn't it? But it just means an unveiling, it just means an uncovering, a revealing, hence a revelation. And that's what John's vision does, of course. It reveals the story behind the story of human history. It's heaven's view, if you like, of this earth story in these vivid visionary pictures. And at the great center of it all, what you cannot miss is the triumph of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, his enthronement over heaven and earth.

You certainly can't miss that recurring theme. It is everywhere, the triumph of the Lamb of God, the Lion of Judah, and the defeat of his enemy and our enemy, that ancient serpent called the devil or Satan. Last week I mentioned how in Revelation chapter 12 we have that picture of his defeat, Satan cast down upon the earth. But of course that's not quite the end of the story of history and so the devil wages relentless warfare on earth against all the people of God, the people of the Lamb, the people of Christ. And in the next chapter of Revelation, chapter 13, we get a vision of how he

does that through a manifestation of two beasts, two evil manifestations throughout world history. The first is a savage and violent destroyer, a beast who looks like a leopard, has paws like a bear and teeth like a lion, with great power to persecute, to cause violence and terror. And the second beast then is quite different, a subtle and vile deceiver. It looks like a lamb, even like God's lamb, but it speaks like a dragon. And it deceives people into worshiping the dragon in all kinds of images that mask the reality of what they're really doing. And that's the story of history in the vivid brushstrokes of the vision of Revelation. But all through the Bible we see very clearly how both these manifestations of Satan's attacks on Christ's people work out through the story of God's people. Think about just the early chapters of the book of Acts. After Pentecost, thousands are being saved, the church is growing, the believers are united, and then all of a sudden, bang, John and Peter are arrested and threatened.

The destroyer attacks. Then, almost immediately, there's great blessing. We're told the people are giving sacrificially for the church's mission. And then suddenly Ananias and Sapphira have their work of deception about their gift. The deceiver attacking from within. And then again, immediately you have the church growing, and the apostles, this time, are imprisoned and beaten up. The destroyer again. And then again, in Acts chapter 6, the strife within the church, with believer against believer, and so on, led astray by the deceiver.

[7:17] And so it is all through the history of God's people, and especially at crucial times for the kingdom and of its growth and security, just as at the period we're looking at after the exile, the period of Ezra and Nehemiah and Esther and the book of Daniel. Daniel, of course, himself sees visions that Jerusalem will be rebuilt and that Christ's kingdom will be established, but amid great conflict. There will be warfare to the very end, just as John was told all those hundreds of years later. And here in Nehemiah 4, what we see is the dark shadow of the beast, the violent destroyer, in real threats and violent attack upon God's workers by these surrounding armies. And as we'll see later on, we'll see also the work of the deceiver, destroying the work or seeking to do it from within, as a Jewish brother rises against Jewish brother. It's exactly the pattern of the book of Acts. And that shouldn't surprise us, because God's story is one story from the beginning to the end. So what does this chapter, which, remember, Paul says is written for us, what does it teach us living in our part of the story? As we, just like Nehemiah and just like the church in the book of Acts, as we also are called to labor in the good work of building for the everlasting kingdom of God amidst many battles and the threats even of real war.

Well, I think this chapter teaches us a very great deal about working faith on a war footing. So let's look at the story. It's one of plots of propaganda and of perseverance. Verses seven to nine speak of dangerous plots. And the message is loud and clear. God's workers will sometimes face real imprisonment, danger in this world. But our God is real and he does answer prayer. And so we can keep on doing real gospel work, even in dangerous times and in dangerous places. Although we mustn't try and pretend away the reality of the threat of real danger. No, we need to work prayerfully and prudently.

Verse seven, look, it speaks about real and present danger. The verbal intimidation, verses one to three, hasn't stopped the work. And we're told the enemies are very angry. Notice that the coalition against them is enlarged. They're totally surrounded. They've got Sanballat in the north in Syria. They've got Tobiah and his Ammonites in the east. That's Jordan today. They've got the Arabs down to the south. And now we're told the Ashdodites. That's the west, the Philistine coast, north of the Gaza Strip. And notice verse eight, their fight is against Jerusalem. Their hatred is squarely against God's city and everything that it represents. His kingdom and his coming king.

Just as Psalm 2 articulates, nations raging, peoples plotting, kings setting themselves against the Lord and his anointed. Just as the church's prayer in Acts chapter four tells us, the same cosmic conflict coming to a climax in the plotting together of Herod and Pilate, the Gentiles and the Jews against the Lord Jesus Christ, God's holy servant come as savior. It's the bitter age-long conflict of the seed of the serpent against the promised seed of faith, the Christ and all his people. And it's one of real rage and anger. And that, of course, is ultimately what underlies the deep enmity that we still see today against anything associated with Israel and the Jews.

And especially the vile determination of some to see the present-day nation of Israel wiped off the map, destroyed completely. Now, of course, we must be careful. The modern state of Israel is not the earthly kingdom of God. And Judaism today is not the inheritor of the true Israelite faith of the Old Testament. Jesus makes that very clear to us, as do all the apostles. We are the circumcision,

says Paul, who have welcomed the Messiah of Israel. And our home is Jerusalem above, not the earthly Jerusalem, not a relic of history. And of course, the tragedy today is that for the most part, world Jewry still don't recognize their Messiah. Paul tells us their minds are hardened. They're blinded by Satan himself. That's what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4. But nevertheless, and Moses himself points this out way back in Deuteronomy chapter 29, even unbelieving Israel will bear witness to Christ, even in their rejection of his covenant. Although it would be a negative witness, as their calamity testifies to God's judgment. And if, as Paul says in Romans 11, though unbelieving Israel are enemies of

[12 : 38] God on account of their rejection of Christ, his people are still beloved for the sake of their forefathers. Well, if that's the case, then ironically, the Jews remain hated by many for the sake of their forefathers, for their connection historically with the one true God. That's why the many Islamists in the Middle East today still hate Israel and the Jews so much, because to them they still represent, however much wrongly, they represent a God whom they hate. That's why they hate the Christian West, as they call it so much today. Although the West is not Christian, it's secularist and atheist. Nevertheless, to them, still it represents this rival God whom they hate. And that's why we're seeing what we see all over Europe today and the world. In terrorist attacks and so on, it is verse 9. In their minds, it is an attack against Jerusalem and everything that it stands for. But back here in Nehemiah's time, these were really serious, dangerous plots. Probably not that of all-out invasion and war. Remember, we saw that

Nehemiah has the backing of Artaxerxes, the emperor, so that would be too risky. But as we know, guerrilla warfare and terrorism is very, very effective. And plots and attacks against Christians today in the world very often are of that nature, aren't they?

If you look at the United Nations website, you'll see that among the 45 countries that are currently members of the United Nations Human Rights Committee, included are countries like Saudi Arabia, India, Qatar, India, Russia. So of course, as part of that committee, these countries can't have as their policy, openly, persecution of Christians. But it's a very different reality on the ground.

In India today, the Hindu nationalist government means that so many turn a blind eye to vicious attacks. There's been a huge increase in persecution of Christians and other religious minorities. There's dreadful persecution in so many of the Middle Eastern countries, including Saudi Arabia. Russia, as you may have heard, has just passed a new law in the name of protecting against religious extremism, but making it illegal to talk to anybody about your faith without prior written permission from the government. It's supposed to be a protection measure, but of course, the great fear is it will be used increasingly to persecute real Christians.

[15 : 17] Very real threats, physical and violent to God's people in the world then and today. So how does real faith respond under fire?

Well, here, just like the church in Acts chapter 4, God's people pray to the sovereign God, and they keep on doing their kingdom work. Verse 9, We prayed to our God. The God, as verse 14 says, who is great and awesome. The God of heaven, as Nehemiah called him in chapter 2. The God whose hand, his good hand, is surely on his people to make them prosper. Notice it says, we prayed. They prayed together. So they all knew that they were leaning on this sovereign God. And they knew that prayer moves God's hand. But we can see here how praying together also motivates God's household. There's no pious passivity here, is there? Just as it wasn't for Nehemiah back in chapter 2. No, when you know God is sovereign, when you know kings and even enemies are under his hand, then you can act. And so they kept on building. But very prudently, of course, they set a guard. Because you see, real reliance on God doesn't lead to foolishness. It leads to realism. And protection is often necessary. So in India, for example, in these past few years, our friends at DBI have had to be very careful because these threats are real. Realism is needed.

And with the recent events in Europe, especially with that attack on a church in France just recently, we might need to be more careful too. I went into Richard's room just the other day and lying on his desk was a pact from the Barnabas Fund for UK churches called Pray and Protect. That's just what Nehemiah did.

Notice the exercise of Nehemiah's wise leadership. He gave a lead to the people in prayer and in assuring protection. That's exactly what the Apostle Paul teaches the leaders of the church in Ephesus to do and tells them he wants them to do as he parts from them in that emotional scene on the beach in Acts chapter 20. He gives himself as a model and as an example for others.

[17 : 41] I've demonstrated what you are to do, he says to them, how to be overseers of Christ's flock. I've taught God's word to you to strengthen you. I've warned you about the enemies who will come and how to resist them. I've led you in prayer. And once again, he kneels down with them all on the beach and prays. And Paul and Nehemiah and others, they are examples of true and godly leadership and oversight.

No one can be a real overseer of God's people, whether it's of a whole flock or a small group or a camp or even their own family, if they don't take a lead in prayer with them. They don't work hard among them. If they're not ready to fight for them, to defend them, to protect them against the inevitable spiritual battles they know that they're going to face. There'll always be plots, the enemies of Christ. And sometimes there will even be real and present physical danger.

But when real faith is under fire, there's not panic, but rather there is prayerful and prudent perseverance. And there'll always be what verses 10 to 14 describe, demoralizing propaganda. The servants of God's kingdom are often weak and few and feeble. And because therefore there is truth in the enemy's taunts, then we're often doubly vulnerable, aren't we, when opposition mounts. But we need to remember that children's hymn. Little ones to him belong. They are weak, but he is strong. And we need to remember what we sang at the beginning of the service. When we fear him, our great and awesome God, we need fear none other. And if we remember that our God is great and awesome, then we can face even the darkest looking threats with a steady eye. Often it's true, isn't it? The enemy comes in like a flood when we're at our lowest ebb and so everything's magnified. Verse 10 says that they were exhausted from the sheer intensity of the work. And tiredness always makes things worse.

[19 : 58] Sometimes all we need is a good night's sleep and things will look very different in the morning. But sometimes it is relentless and cumulative. And that's when our Christian life, that's when our Christian service can begin to get us down. We're battling away to get an SU group going or established or keep it going in our school or our Christian union in our college or our university. And it's small and struggling. Or some ministry that we're involved in in church or whatever it might be. And you just think, it's just no use. I can't do it. I can't go on. It's just too much.

That's how the students that will soon be beginning at Corn Hill nearly always feel by about the October half term. Isn't that right, Edward? We had a bumper crop from the church this year. I think there's nine of you going to start Corn Hill. So let me warn you, you will be singing the mantra of verse 10 come mid-October this year. You'll be saying, there's far too much material. We can't cope.

Even the strongest are floundering. Our strength is failing. We'll never be able to finish this. Yeah, you'll be thinking that. That's how Nehemiah's team felt.

Add to that that every enemy threat was being repeated to them over and over by their own Israelite brothers who thought they were being helpful but were actually just rubbing in their sense of despair and you'll see that they were in the midst of a full-blown project fear.

We know what that can be like, don't we? Have you heard what they're saying? They're going to kill you all. They're going to stop the work. You're finished. You must come back to us.

[21 : 39] Leave there immediately. Jim Packer points out that few, if any, churches lack friends of a sort who feel it their special spiritual ministry to impart negative assurances of this kind and who never doubt that their doomsaying is the most helpful contribution they can make.

The factual information they may bring, of course, can be useful but the oracular gloom that they spread is simply unbelief masquerading as wisdom and needs to be nipped in the bud.

My friends, sometimes people like that do mean well. They just don't realize how always being a negative voice at a meeting, always saying something depressing at a committee is really demoralizing on other people.

Especially leaders, let me say. They don't realize it. Sometimes, though, it is more sinister. Like a friend in ministry of mine who was told by another evangelical minister.

Don't make a stand on the same-sex marriage issue in the church. Look at all those who have taken a stand. Look at the physical and the mental health costs they've borne.

[22 : 56] Don't end up like that. Well, that's true. That's true. But that's not a right thing to say.

And that's the kind of thing that Nehemiah was getting here ten times over, we're told, verse 12. Return to us. Flee from that. Don't fall into that tragedy.

Notice the focus on the demoralizing and the demotivating power of words. Three times, do you see, we're told, it was said. Verse 10, it was said.

Judah said. Verse 11, our enemies said. Verse 12, from all directions they said to us. We need to remember that, don't we?

How powerful words are and how negative comments can so easily spread discontent and discouragement and demoralization among God's people.

[23 : 58] What was Nehemiah's response to that? Verse 13, so, so he did two things. First, they made practical provisions to meet the threats. The work was halted temporarily while they mustered defenses in the most vulnerable parts, the gaps behind the wall.

Remember, the walls were only half height by that time. And secondly, but just as importantly, he gave a powerful proclamation to counter the people's fears and foreboding.

Verse 14, don't fear them. Remember the Lord who is great and awesome. Fear him and you need fear no others. Now, notice again, just as the way his prayer to a sovereign God didn't lead to passivity, neither does his proclamation of a sovereign God.

It leads to action. Remember the Lord, he says, great and awesome and fight. God's sovereign authority leads to our laboring in battle for his kingdom's sake.

Think of the Great Commission. Jesus says, all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. So you go, therefore, and make disciples. Well, only God can bring to new birth.

[25 : 10] Only God can raise the dead. Only God is sovereign to save. But because he has said he will do that, he tells us to go and get on with it. And lo, I am with you always.

See, it's what Paul said to the Colossian church in Colossians 1.29. For this, we toil struggling with all his energy that he so powerfully works in us.

See how great our God is, says Nehemiah. And see how great the issues are that are at stake here. And fight because everything depends upon it.

Your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, your homes. Now notice, he means not just in the mere natural sense of our loved ones, but what he is saying is at stake here is the people of God and the city of God.

And you can have no future if the kingdom of God has no future. Now you and I, we're not Israelites whose future depends on the integrity of the earthly Jerusalem or the temple being rebuilt.

[26 : 20] But it's all the more true of us who belong to the kingdom of Christ in these last days. The stakes for us are so very high. Because the real future of our families, of our loved ones, of our neighbors, their everlasting future, it depends utterly on the health and the preservation and the prospering of the church of Jesus Christ in our generation, in our city, in our nation.

And the omens are not good. There are many threats. Voices all around us telling us ten times over, oh, the cause is in ruins, the church is dying, it's dying, people are departing, it's all over, it's a lost cause.

That's what the media thinks, that's what the public thinks. But we must say, no, remember, our God is great and awesome. So fight, fight for the life of the gospel cause of Christ in our day because our God will fight for us.

Not with physical spears and swords, of course, that's not our calling now. Ours is the joyous calling in this age of salvation to present the mercy of Christ, to take the sword of the Spirit of God in the gospel which destroys strongholds of unbelief, which brings rebels captive to Christ and calls to Him all those that He is calling.

We mustn't be demoralized by the propaganda of our enemies. We have the weapons of victory. But of course, we do need to be practical, we need to be prudent about how to preserve and protect the mission of the church in a hostile age, both from without and from within.

[28 : 11] And sometimes that means careful planning, careful organization, and even a temporary but necessary diversion from the main right-handed work, as we call it, of building the kingdom of Christ, a diversion sometimes to that left-handed defensive task which can be necessary.

Think of Acts chapter 6. When all that strife broke out, the apostles stopped what they were doing, spent considerable time organizing a whole new team to sort out all those controversial matters so that in the long term, the real ministry of the church would not falter but would go on.

That's something of that kind that we had to do here as a church a few years ago. We had to devote many hours and days and months to organizing civil defenses to protect our gospel assets as much as possible and so on.

It was a huge distraction in some ways but it was absolutely essential. And I think just like Nehemiah's people here, we too emerge stronger.

We emerge more able to cope with battles, with change, with upheaval, with growth because we learned a warfare mentality. My father's generation used to have a phrase that they repeated during the war.

[29 : 28] Some of you here will remember it. What was it? There's a war on, you know. Remember that? What did it mean? It meant things are different. Expectations are different. There's rationing.

There's blackouts. Things that are normal at other times are not normal now. Why? There's a war on, you know. What we need in the church, don't we? We need to learn that spirit and keep that spirit.

Even when the immediate threats of the heat of battle have receded as we see in verses 15 to 23. But what we see there is ongoing, dogged perseverance.

Because there's a great temptation to ease off when the immediate threat recedes. But no, real working faith must always remain on a real war footing because there is a war on and there will be conflict right till the very end.

And so verse 15 brings relief. The enemy is frustrated. They back off. And it is a great relief, isn't it? When the heat of battle and the intensity is laying aside and things go more back to normal.

[30 : 37] In church life, we breathe a sigh of relief. Or in our own personal experience when a really tough trial passes or a great intense period of temptation eases.

And we thank God for that. And that's what happened here. And each then returned to the real work. The right-handed work of building for the future of the kingdom. Notice all the focus on the work.

Verse 15, each to his work. Verse 16, they worked. Verse 17, they labored in the work. Verse 19, the work is great. Verse 21, so we labored at the work.

Do you get the message? The work must go on. Christ will build his church. The kingdom will advance. None hindering. That's the message of the Bible.

But they had learned lessons from the assault and from their victory. As we always do, each victory helps you some other to win, as the hymn says.

[31 : 43] And so their tactics were revised. Verse 16, from that day on, half of them worked directly on building, half of them on defense. Verse 17, everyone worked so that they were ready for battle.

And notice again the prominence of the leaders in the work. Verse 16, they're standing right behind the entire effort very publicly. And Nehemiah's there with his trumpeter ready to rally the troops with oversight over the whole work.

And that is always the pattern, isn't it, in a healthy work among God's people. Leaders are seen and heard giving a lead. Giving a lead in prayer, in hard work, in personal encouragement, setting an example.

And someone in charge that everyone knows is keeping a watch over everything. A hand on the tiller ready both for work and for immediate warfare.

See, it's a vivid picture, isn't it, of God's people working out their faith but knowing they must always be on a war footing. There's no triumphalism here.

[32 : 47] You will not find that anywhere in the New Testament. Paul says, no, because we're not unaware of our enemy's schemes and we mustn't be outwitted by him. We must be armed against him.

Read Ephesians chapter 6 later on in the light of this chapter and it will come to life for you. But we can be armed against the enemy because, just like Nehemiah, we also trust in our God's providence.

Verse 15. He always frustrates the plans of his enemies. And we also know his sovereign promise. Verse 20.

Our God will fight for us. And as Paul says in Romans 8, if God is for us, who then can be against us in any ultimate sense? None.

Without that certainty, we would be in despair, wouldn't we? But no. We are weak, just like these people.

[33 : 50] By ourselves, we will never be able. That is true. But we're not by ourselves. God is with us. And so, although we must never be triumphalistic, we can be deeply triumphant and full of thanks to God who has given us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

And that was the force of the message that Nehemiah brought to his people, pointing them constantly to the truth about God. And verses 21 to 23 show us just how bracing and how encouraging that message obviously was.

So, we labored in the work from the crack of dawn until the stars came out. You see, they're not tired now. That's because good hard work doesn't exhaust you.

It exhilarates you. It's only when your eyes are off God. It's only when we're all introspective, focusing on ourselves, on our own complaints, on our own miseries. That's what makes people demoralized, but not hard work when you know God is at work.

And Nehemiah fixed the vision of this people outside of themselves. And he lifted their eyes up to see their God, to rejoice in his kingdom purposes. And he led by example.

[35 : 05] Do you see, he's still there right in the midst, verse 23. No silk pajamas and feather bed for Nehemiah. No, he's right in the midst of the work. No clothes taken off, sword by his side.

Just like the Apostle Paul who tells us he worked harder than all the rest. If you can be a Christian leader of any kind, you have to be prepared to work hard, harder than all the rest.

Whatever that leadership is, whether it's leading a church, whether it's leading a camp, a Bible study group, indeed, whether it's leading in your own families. This is a word to you men.

Do not expect your wife and your children to have more spiritual enthusiasm than you show that you have to them. Don't expect your children to grow up with more devotion to the scriptures and to prayer and to mission than you have shown them by example.

Nehemiah must have felt the burden, mustn't he, more than any of them. But he knew his God, the great and awesome God. He knew he was the frustrator of their enemies. He knew he was the God who fights for his people.

[36 : 13] And he pointed people constantly to that God. And he led people constantly to that God in prayer. And so he was able to lead them wisely and well, to work out their faith on a war footing so that the work of God that was vital for the kingdom in their generation was not abandoned but was completed.

And the Apostle Paul says to us, these scriptures are written for us. That through the encouragement of these scriptures we might have hope.

And that we too might work together harmoniously to glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ as they so clearly did. So let me finish with three implications for us today.

First, conflict, struggle, and even warfare is real. And that will mean even for many Christians in today's world real physical danger and persecution and even martyrdom.

Satan's destroying beast is real. And it's wreaked violence on God's people all through history. Read the book of Acts.

[37 : 32] Read the history of the early church. Unlike the spread of Islam which conquered the world through the sword and subjugation, the church of Jesus Christ spread throughout the world in the midst of great persecution and opposition then and still today.

It was the blood of the martyrs that truly was the seed of the church. In the last century, the 20th century, saw more Christian martyrs than all 19 centuries that went before.

And in the future, who knows what will happen in this nation of ours. In our lifetime, it has been predominantly the deceiving beast, the subtle lies of the secularists, the humanists, the atheists. But friends, history shows that where that beast triumphs, usually violent aggression does follow. And our culture is exceedingly hostile and intolerant now to any who will not worship the idols of perverted sexuality and all sorts of other destructive follies.

So we need realism. We need to pray to God also, don't we, about the protection that we need. Some Christians are incredibly naive.

[38 : 54] I've heard evangelical Christians scorn, for example, the work of the Christian Institute in defending Christian freedoms, freedom of speech, and preventing the state from encroaching in a totalitarian way onto the lives of families.

Friends, Nehemiah would say to them, don't be a fool. Do you not realize the enemy is real? Use God's gifts of your democratic freedoms while you have it to prepare, to protect your natural kith and kin, but above all, to protect your spiritual family, the Church of Jesus Christ.

Don't panic, but pray and prepare and protect while you can. Conflict is real. Second, conflict and struggle is relentless and it will be especially so whenever the Church is advancing and the relentlessness of that spiritual struggle can lead us easily to become tired and demoralized and

even despairing.

And that is when words, when what is said can be so demoralizing. So friends, let's not be inadvertent demoralizers of the Church of God.

far less deliberate ones. If you are that kind of person who can't help saying the negative thing all the time, then repent and pray to God. Ask God for a gift of encouragement for His people because that's what we need in tough times.

[40 : 27] And all of us need to remind each other that we are not by ourselves, that the task is not overwhelming. Remember the Lord, great and awesome.

He is in control. And remember Paul's words. It's been granted to us also to suffer for His sake because you're in the same struggle as He had and as Nehemiah had.

What an encouragement that is. That's why the Apostles delighted and rejoiced when they were brutalized for the sake of Christ. It wasn't because they were some sort of masochists. They rejoiced because they had been counted worthy to suffer for the name.

And so they knew they truly belonged to the everlasting kingdom of God. It was an assurance to them. What a wonderful thing to be assured of that our names are written in heaven.

And in church life, what that means is there are going to be tough times, especially if our work is going to grow. But don't be overwhelmed. Don't be demoralized. Don't demoralize other people.

[41 : 30] Remember the Lord and battle on. In personal life, there will be times when the struggle just feels so great for you against sin and temptation.

When ten times over, a hundred times over, the world's voice is, oh, come back to us. Give up the struggle before it kills you. The only way is to come back and join us. No! Remember the Lord.

Great and awesome. Peter says the devil is roaring around seeking who may devour. But that's what he's doing to every true believer around the world so rejoice. You're one of them.

Resist the devil, says James, and he will flee from you. God is great and awesome. But conflict is real and it will be relentless.

But finally, conflict and battle and struggle is required for every true believer according to Jesus. for its dogged perseverance through these times of testing that defines real and genuine Christian faith.

[42 : 38] You will be hated by all for my name's sake, says Jesus, but the one who endures to the end will be saved. Again, in Matthew 24, Jesus similarly talks about great tribulation and conflict and hatred.

and the love of many, he says, will grow cold, but the one who endures to the end will be saved.

And the risen Lord Jesus in every single one of those seven letters to the churches in Revelation chapter 2 and 3, he urges that dogged perseverance that is the essence of true saving faith.

To the one who conquers, says Jesus, who holds fast through all persecution and trial and conflict to the very end, to him, I will grant the right to eat of the tree of life, the crown of life, the hidden manna.

I will confess his name before the Father and all his angels and he will reign with me. You have need of endurance, says the apostle in Hebrews 10, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what is promised.

And then he does a Nehemiah. He says, remember the Lord, great and awesome. He will fight for us. He points us, do you remember, to our great God and reminds us that we belong to him. He says, we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but we are those who have faith and preserve their souls.

[44 : 15] Just like Nehemiah and all his people. Just like all the great cloud of witnesses throughout the Bible's story that he names in Hebrews 11. So he says to us, therefore, like them, let us run with endurance, with dogged perseverance the race set before us, looking to our awesome God, looking to Jesus, the author, the perfecter of our faith, who likewise endured the cross and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Consider him who endured from sinners such great hostility himself so that you may not grow weary and faint-hearted.

Friends, let's keep one another working our faith on that wartime footing right to the end with dogged perseverance.

And we can do that, says this chapter, because our God, the great and awesome God, will fight for us and never let us down.

Let's pray. Let's pray. O God, who knowest us to be set in the midst of so many and great dangers, that by reason of the frailty of our nature we cannot always stand upright, grant to us such strength and protection as may support us in all the dangers and carry us through all temptations, through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

[46 : 03] Amen.