

The Work of Real Service

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[0 : 0 0] Well, we're going to turn now to our Bibles and to our reading this morning, which is in Nehemiah chapter 3. We've been on Nehemiah for the Sunday evenings in July. We're moving to the mornings now. You'll find that on page 399 in our visitor's Bibles.

And I'm going to read through to chapter 6 of Nehemiah chapter 4, which actually in the Hebrew Bible is the end of chapter 3. I'm not quite sure why the English Bible made the chapter division in a different place, but it seems to make more sense going down to chapter 4, verse 6.

You will remember that the story thus far has been about Nehemiah, the cupbearer to the king, away far away in Persia, determining on news from Jerusalem about the wrecked state of the walls and of the people there that he should seek to return to build and rebuild the city.

And he does that. He gets the king's permission and he goes to Jerusalem. He does a survey and then he presents the task to all those who are going to help him. And in chapter 2, verse 16, he says, Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem that we may no longer suffer derision.

And they said, Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for the good work. And here's chapter 3. It begins, Then Eliashib, the high priest, rose up with his brothers the priests and they built the sheep gate.

[1 : 3 4] By the way, you may not see very well on the screen, but you have a handout too that shows this map of Jerusalem. We're going around, starting at the top, anti-clockwise. So you don't have to follow, but it just shows you where all this goes in case you want to read it and look at the map.

They consecrated the sheep gate and set its doors. They consecrated it as far as the Tower of the Hundred, as far as the Tower of Hananel. Next to him, the men of Jericho built.

Next to them, Zachur, the son of Imri built. The sons of Hassanah built the fish gate. They laid its beams, set its doors, its bolts, and its bars. Next to them, Merimoth, the son of Uriah, son of Hachos, repaired.

And next to them, Meshulam, the son of Berechiah, son of Mehezabel, repaired. And next to them, Zadok, the son of Banna, repaired. Next to them, the Tekuities repaired. But their nobles would not stoop to serve their lord.

Joida, the son of Passiah, and Meshulam, son of Bozadiah, repaired the gate of Yashanah. They laid its beams, set its doors, its bolts, and its bars. Next to them, repaired Melatiah, the Gibeonite, and Jadon, the Merahanite, the men of Gibeon, of Mizpah, the seat of the governor of the province beyond the river.

[2 : 4 9] Next to them, Uziel, the son of Harhaya, goldsmiths, repaired. Next to them, Hananiah, one of the perfumers, repaired. And they restored Jerusalem as far as the broad wall.

Next to them, Rephiah, the son of Hur, the ruler of half the district of Jerusalem, repaired. Next to them, Jediah, the son of Haramath, repaired, opposite his house.

Next to them, Hattush, the son of Hashbuniah, repaired. Malkijah, the son of Haram, and Hashub, the son of Pahath-Moab, repaired another section, or a second section, and the tower of the ovens.

Next to him, Shalom, the son of Halahesh, ruler of half the district of Jerusalem, repaired. He and his daughters. Hanun and the inhabitants of Zanoah repaired the valley gate.

They rebuilt it and set its doors, its bolts, and its bars, and repaired a thousand cubits of the wall as far as the dung gate. Malkijah, the son of Rehah, ruler of the district of Beth-Hakarim, repaired the dung gate.

[3 : 54] He rebuilt it, set its doors, its bolts, and its bars. Shalom, the son of Kolhose, ruler of the district of Mizpah, repaired the fountain gate. He rebuilt it and covered it and set its doors, its bolts, and its bars.

And he built the wall of the pool of Shelah of the king's garden as far as the stairs that go down from the city of David. After him, Nehemiah, the son of Asbuk, ruler of half the district of Beth-Zur, repaired a point opposite the tombs of David, as far as the artificial pool, and as far as the house of the mighty men.

After him, the Levites repaired. Rahom, the son of Bani. Next to him, Hashabiah, ruler of half the district of Keilah, repaired for his district. After him, their brothers repaired.

Barvi, the son of Henadad, ruler of half the district of Keilah. Next to him, Ezer, the son of Jeshua, ruler of Mizpah, repaired another section opposite the ascent of the armory at the buttress.

After him, Baruch, the son of Zabai, zealously repaired another section from the buttress to the door of the house of Eliashib, the high priest. After him, Merimoth, son of Uriah, son of Hachos, repaired a second section from the door of the house of Eliashib to the end of the house of Eliashib.

[5 : 08] After him, the priests, the men of the surrounding area, repaired. After them, Benjamin and Hashub repaired opposite their house. After them, Azariah, the son of Masiah, son of Ananiah, repaired beside his own house.

After him, Benui, the son of Henadad, repaired another section from the house of Azariah to the buttress and to the corner. Palal, the son of Uziah, repaired opposite the buttress and the tower projecting from the upper house of the king at the court of the guard.

After him, Padaiah, the son of Parosh, and the temple servants living on Ophel, repaired a point opposite the water gate on the east and the projecting tower. After him, the Tekoites repaired a second section opposite the gate projecting, the great projecting tower as far as the wall of Ophel.

Above the horse gate, the priests repaired, each one opposite his own house. After them, Zadok, the son of Inmer, repaired opposite his own house. After him, Shemaiah, the son of Shekeniah, the keeper of the east gate, repaired.

After him, Hananiah, the son of Shelemiah, and Hanun, the sixth son of Zalaf, repaired another section. After him, Meshulam, the son of Berechiah, repaired opposite his chamber. After him, Malkijah, one of the goldsmiths, repaired as far as the house of the temple servants and of the merchants opposite the muster gate and to the upper chamber of the corner.

[6 : 32] And between the upper chamber of the corner and the sheep gate, the goldsmiths and the merchants repaired. But when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews.

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? Tobiah, the Ammonite, was beside him, and he said, Yes, what they are building, if a fox goes up on it, he'll break down their stone wall.

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're captives.

Do not cover their guilt. Do not cover their guilt. Let not their sin be blotted out from your sight. For they have provoked you to anger in the presence of the builders.

[7 : 39] So we built the wall, and all the wall was joined together to half its height. For the people had a mind, a heart, to work.

Just listen to these words from the Apostle Paul. Christ gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building the body of Christ.

Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, and to Christ, from whom the whole body joined and held together by every joint with which it's equipped.

When each part is working properly, makes the body grow, so that it builds itself in love.

Ephesians 4, verse 16. Amen. May God bless to us this, his word. Amen. Well, perhaps you'd turn with me to Nehemiah chapter 3 and to the passage that we read together a moment ago.

[8 : 57] And it's a passage all about the work of real worship. The purpose of the Olympic Games that began this week is to showcase, it's to display the amazing dimensions on the sporting glory, the physical prowess of mankind.

And indeed, it is a wonderful spectacle of that. Notwithstanding, of course, as I mentioned, that the doping scandals remind us of another less glorious side of our human nature.

But the Apostle of Christ, Paul, tells us that the ultimate purpose of mankind is to be a showcase for the glory and the splendor of God.

Indeed, that's the purpose of the whole of creation. That is what the church is for. And our task in the church is to make the church grow and to build itself so that it will attain its true destiny.

That is why the risen Lord Jesus sent his Holy Spirit upon the church in order to make that possible. And so that that will undoubtedly happen. Because it's the gifts of the Holy Spirit of Christ alone that can empower the church for real kingdom building.

[10 : 16] And of course, kingdom building is not, like the Olympics, a spectator sport. It's not that just a few hundred people take part and billions watch it on TV. Sometimes people think like that about the church.

That it's just a few people participating, singing and preaching and so on. And everybody else just spectates. The Bible says nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, in Ephesians 4, as we read, Paul is absolutely clear.

The gifts that God gives to some in the church, and he focuses particularly upon the gifts of ministry of God's word, those are given, he says, in order that through these things being displayed and being exercised, all the saints, all the saints, all the saints, will be equipped for the work of ministry.

Every single one ministers, serves. That's what the word means. What is that service? Well, I read those verses.

It's building the body of Christ. Building God's church is the task of all God's people. And when each part is working properly, says Paul, that is when the body grows so that it builds itself in love.

[11 : 34] Ephesians 4, verse 16. Every part working properly, building the church for eternity. So to worship is doing that.

That's what the Bible means by worship. Not singing and dancing, either highbrow or lowbrow. Not sacraments, not sermons even. But serving. That's why one of the commonest words in the New Testament for worship is translated interchangeably as worship or as service.

In Romans 12, verse 1, remember Paul is giving the response to his majestic explanation of the gospel in 11 chapters of Romans. And he says, therefore, in response to the mercies of God, present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.

That is your spiritual worship. That's what our version says. Another version says, that is your reasonable service. Same thing.

In other words, he's saying, if you've understood anything about what real worship of God is in response to his grace in your lives, it's this, that your whole bodily life is a living sacrifice.

[12 : 46] It's to be given your life, serving with God's people and for the everlasting kingdom of Christ. That's why it's facile, really, for Christians today to talk about worship styles.

Because according to the Bible, there's only two possible worship styles. The sacrificial serving, that is, building his kingdom with his church, that's real worship. Or this self-serving, which is false worship, indeed, which is anti-worship.

And the message of the Bible is absolutely clear. The kingdom of Christ and the church of Christ is built, whether in Paul's day or our day or indeed in Nehemiah's day. It's built by a worshiping people.

That is, by people who understand the true work of worship. And therefore, by people and by churches who have a true serving mentality. Where all the saints, as Paul says, are doing the work of service.

Each part, working properly, making the body grow so that it builds itself in love. Now we can read the apostle talking about that in plain prose there in Ephesians or Philippians or elsewhere in the New Testament.

[14 : 02] But remember, of course, that Paul and the other apostles always point us back too to the Old Testament. Which they say likewise is written for our instruction, for our example and for our encouragement.

And I think you will look very hard to find a more vivid illustration of a worshiping people with a true serving mentality, laboring side by side for the future of the kingdom of God.

You'll look far to find a better illustration than the chapter we just read, Nehemiah chapter 3. In fact, the verse that ends the section in chapter 4 verse 6 sums the whole thing up.

So we built because the people had a mind, literally had a heart for work. So I want to highlight some things, three main things that the writer surely wants us to note and understand in this section.

And the first is that this is supremely real worship. Real worship demonstrated by the servant hearts of God's kingdom-building people. Let me note a few things.

[15 : 04] First, verse 1. Notice that the work began with the exercise of real leadership. Real leadership. The high priest and his brother priest were told rose up and built. That is, the official leaders of God's people took the lead.

Now that might seem obvious to you. It's their job, for goodness sake. But sadly, that has not always been the case in the history of the church, both since Christ's coming and indeed throughout the history of the Old Testament.

Think of your Bibles. Think of Samuel's day. The official leader, the priest, Eli, was so ineffectual and his sons, the priests, were so utterly corrupt, God had to bypass them altogether and raise up Samuel, that little boy, to become the leader of Israel.

Or later on in Amos' day, the prophet. Remember Amos, he was a shepherd, he was a herdsman from Tekoa. But the priests and the prophets were so corrupt, God had to bypass them and go and get somebody completely out of the picture to speak truth and lead his people.

Think about church history, the medieval church. The official leadership of the medieval church was so utterly corrupt, so utterly incapable of reforming itself, God had to go and use an obscure monk in Germany by the name of Martin Luther to lead the great reformation.

[16 : 22] Think of the 19th century. To our shame, it was not the leaders of the established churches who took the lead in missionary activity. It was lay movements that had to spring up to form missionary societies to take the gospel to the unreached parts of our world.

Think of the 20th century when a hundred years of theological liberalism so destroyed and decimated the churches in our nation that again, it was not the official leaders of the churches who kept the gospel alive.

It was lay movements like Scripture Union and IVF and UCCF and many, many others. So often, those appointed to be in the chief spiritual leadership of God's church have not done anything to give a real lead.

But not so here. It's remarkable. The high priests and all the rest were told they rose up and they built. And notice, verse 1, they consecrated the sheep gate and the walls.

In other words, they understood that this was a spiritual act. This was worship. This was the work of the kingdom of God that they are engaged in. It's a spiritual task. They're presenting their bodies as a living sacrifice, a spiritual sacrifice to God.

[17 : 38] They consecrated it. These were not just any old city walls that were being built. These are the walls of the city of God. This is the work of his everlasting kingdom.

And so these men were real worship leaders. A real worship leader doesn't lead singing. He leads in serving the kingdom of God. And he leads by example.

He does hard work. And he leads with zeal in the manner of that service in every aspect of his life. That's why when you come to the New Testament in Paul's pastoral letters, he is so determined that the church should have just that kind of real spiritual leadership by example.

This is the second thing that the pastoral epistles make that clear because priorities in church life are important. And we see that here. These leaders had a real understanding of real priorities.

Notice where they started building. It was the Sheep Gate up in that most northern wall. It's where they start. And maybe you notice in verses 1 to 3 the word used, the verb is build.

[18 : 43] They built. They built the Sheep Gate. Next to them, others built. And after that, all the way through the chapter from verse 4 onwards, pretty much, it's repair. So it seems that that northern wall was the most badly destroyed area of them all.

It was completely destroyed. Whereas other parts were more variously damaged. Now that's because the invasion from Assyria, from Babylon, and so on, came from the north.

And so they assaulted the city in that north wall. And that was where the maximum assault was. Utterly destroyed. And that means the leaders took on both the toughest task of rebuilding from scratch and the priority task.

that was the vital area that must be repaired first because it was where the greatest damage had been done and it was where damage could be done again unless those walls were made strong.

Well, we need to think, don't we, about the priorities in the work of worship today. We are not building the earthly walls of Jerusalem, but we are still engaged in building and in rebuilding after a terrible time of decline and damage.

[19 : 52] We are rebuilding the walls of the everlasting city of God, of the temple of his living stones, which is the church of Jesus Christ in our city, in our nation, and throughout the world.

And so in every generation we also have to discern those clear priorities, don't we? That was what happened at the Reformation. The greatest destruction that was wreaked by the medieval Roman church was the locking away of the scriptures so that ordinary people had no access to the word of God.

It was only in Latin for the priests and the priests became so corrupt and utterly distant from the people. So there was a famine of the word of God right across Europe and a total ignorance of the gospel of God among ordinary people.

And that was why men like Tyndale, men like Wycliffe, made an absolute priority of making the Bible available to ordinary people. They were countering that famine of the word of God, which means the muzzling of the spirit of God.

Because the word of God is the sword of the spirit of God. And that's what the later reformers gave their attention to in the same way. Because unless that absolute priority was addressed, no real spiritual life and worship could be reborn.

[21 : 10] Friends, the sad truth is it is not so different in our own day. More than a century of theological liberalism has destroyed confidence in the scriptures even within the professing church.

And that is where the greatest assault came that breached the walls, that led on to all kinds of other disastrous consequences for the church in the Western world today.

That's why we see the calamitous decline in the mainline denominations. That's why we see the drift in so many churches to embracing the ways, the practices of a pagan world around us.

The real problem is ignorance of the truth of God. It's rejection of the living word of God. And so if the church in the West and in the church in our nation is going to be rebuilt and strengthened, then we must again see that the great priority for the church is that.

The priority for our church today is not better music, whatever you happen to think that might be. It's not better buildings, it's not better media images or any of these things.

[22 : 21] No, the priority is to first rebuild what has been most assaulted and most destroyed. And that is the place of the gospel of God.

The priority must be to release the word of God among the people of God again with power, with passion, with commitment and with confidence that this word is the power of God.

No use building other bits and pieces if the chief breach has never been addressed, has never been reestablished. And that's what those leaders in Jeremiah and Nehemiah's day could see so clearly.

And that's what we also must see in our own day. Very easy, isn't it, to talk? It's exciting to talk about church planting.

But if that just means moving this group of people over there to another place, then it's just musical chairs. Unless the chief buttress is in place.

- [23 : 18] Unless there is real and effective ministry of God's word right at the heart of the enterprise. And that means leaders who are able to do effectively the work of building.
- The work of teaching and applying God's word effectively. The work of rightly handling the word of truth, as Paul calls it. And the work of being able to teach and train others in that task without which the church will never ever be built or rebuilt.
- People who will show by example what it means to build a living church. And that's why we make that our priority in our ministry together.
- Especially in training our young people from the earliest days right through Tron Youth to release the word. By the way, notice the name release the word. That's what it's about. Releasing God's word among his people.
- Because the greatest need in the church today in the west is a recovery, a rebuilding of the conviction that it is the gospel word of God and the proclamation of that that is the power of God for salvation.
- [24 : 30] And that is what will equip all the saints for their work of ministry in serving the kingdom of God. So these leaders at least knew what those priorities were and they rolled their sleeves up and they took a lead.
- And others clearly followed them. Although not all. Did you notice verse 5? You'll never get 100% cooperation in the work of true worship and truly serving the kingdom of God.
- There will always be some in the church who disappoint. And that's what we see here in verse 5. And it's a surfacing, isn't it, of real pride. The nobles of Tekoa wouldn't stoop to serve their Lord.
- Literally, they wouldn't bend their necks. They were stiff-necked. And in the Bible, that's a very damning term. It's what God said of the Israelites when they rebelled against them and turned away and made the golden calf to worship in the book of Exodus.
- It's the pride of heart that makes some people think that their status somehow exempts them from serving, from worshiping just like everybody else.
- [25 : 43] And sadly, that too is a trait that spans the generations. I remember years ago when I was training as a divinity student in Aberdeen, I was attached to a church and I went to a meeting of that church with a minister and there were various things that needed done and one particular job needed doing and the minister said to this man, would you be able to do that job?
- And he looked at him rather aghast and replied, but I'm a deacon. I shouldn't have to do things like that. And the irony was palpable because that word deacon means servant.
- I'm a servant. I shouldn't have to stoop to serve. That's the attitude of the nobles of Tekoa. They're thinking about their status not about service.
- But you see, that's self-worship. That's not true worship of God because it's not all about you and me. We can be very precious, can't we?
- People often are. They'll say things like, oh, I want to express my gifts in this church and this church doesn't really provide the means for me to express my gifts to fulfillment so I'm going somewhere else.
- [26 : 53] Well, here's the thing. The Bible and the Lord is not the least but interested in what you think about expressing your gifts. The Bible and God is interested in whether you are willing to serve on the walls of building God's kingdom along with the rest of his people.
- In fact, nowhere in the New Testament ever are Christian people encouraged to look into their own lives and recognize their own gifts and seek them to be fulfilled. It's exactly the opposite.
- It tells us to look where there are needs for service and to be ready to serve and to get on with serving and doing that and building the body of Christ wherever the need is.

The church in Corinth was very full of that kind of pride and arrogance. They were very self-obsessed with all their own gifts and Paul slaps them down very, very hard in those two letters he writes to them.

He challenges their childishness. He says, grow up! He says, there's only one body that matters. It's the body of Christ and whatever the Spirit of Christ gives to you he gives for the common good so you are to excel in what builds the church not in what puffs yourself up.

[28 : 10] And that's a challenge friends, isn't it? It's a warning to all of us. The church of God will never be built. It will never advance if we're more interested in our status than in his service.

And the Lord sees and the Lord knows. A terrible thought I think, isn't it? That the record of God's eternal kingdom forever will record of these people that they were unwilling to stoop to serve in the great calling of building the kingdom of Christ.

Can that attitude really belong to a disciple of a Lord who made himself nothing? Who took the form of a servant who humbled himself even to death on a cross and said that a disciple is somebody who follows him and denies themselves and takes up their cross and follows him in the same way?

Real pride. But happily, the rest of the chapter is full, isn't it, of real and zealous and sacrificial service. Notice there is great humility.

Did you notice all the names of the rulers who did serve? Verse 9, Rephiah. He ruled half Jerusalem. And verse 12, Shalom presumably ruled the other half of Jerusalem. And he served.

[29 : 32] And others, verse 16, there's another Nehemiah, there's Hashabiah, verse 17, there's Ezra, verse 19, and so on. By the way, especially note verse 14, Malkijah, he's a noble ruler.

He took upon it himself to repair the dung gate. We might call it the sewage gate. Not sure I'd fancy that very much, would you? But this ruler didn't think it was beneath him to get up to his oxters in sewage for the sake of building with the people of God.

And friends, see the truth is in real Christian ministry, mission involves often getting painted and tainted with a lot of the detritus and the mess of a sinful world.

A lot of the mess of broken people's lives. You can't pull somebody out of a sewer, can you, without the smell and the mess having some effect on your own life. That's just reality. But thank God for the Malkijah spirit.

It wasn't for people like him. Some of us, I'm sure, in this room here would never have been saved for Jesus Christ. Isn't that true? Notice Merrimoth, verse 4.

[30 : 41] We saw him back in Ezra chapter 8. He was one of those that Ezra trusted withholding the gold and the treasure of the temple. But he too is not afraid of hard work along with everybody else. In fact, if you look at verse 21, we're told that he also repaired another section, a second section.

That's what that word literally says, a second section. It's there three times in verses 19 to 21 and in verse 24 and verse 30 and verse 11 and verse 27.

Do you notice the men of Tekoa, they repaired a second section no doubt to make up for their proud nobles? Wonderful, isn't it? When there's that spirit in the church.

When there are those that God has given a great capacity for work and instead of saying, well, I've done my bit, it's jolly well time for somebody else to do theirs, leave it to them. When instead of saying that, they say, well, I've still got time, I've still got energy, what else can I do?

What more can I do to serve the cause of Christ? That is the worship that God delights in. And notice finally that everyone, everyone just mucks in together.

[31 : 44] There's no professional builders here. We didn't have Shimon the surveyor. We didn't find Baruch the builder. We didn't find Elijah the engineer, did we? No, verse 8, it's goldsmiths. What do they know?

Perfumers. Goodness. And women as well, verse 12. Even the daughters of rulers. Don't know if Shalom had no sons. Maybe their sons were rather shirkers.

Perhaps that's why the daughters were men. But his girls were no shirkers. And it is often, isn't it, the women who sometimes put the men to shame.

Verse 32 rounds it off and we're all the way right back round to the top, to the sheep gate where the priests work. And you'll see they were working side by side, verse 32, with the goldsmiths and the merchants.

And Derek Kidner, the commentator, says that just symbolizes the whole enterprise. Here is the people of God with servant hearts building together for the kingdom of God side by side with one heart and one mind for the work of the Lord.

[32 : 46] That is real worship. And the message for the first readers of this book in the generations following, it's very clear, isn't it? Do you want to see the kingdom of God advancing in Israel?

Do you want to see God's blessing on his nation? Do you want to see God's glory being radiated to the world around? That's what you need to be. A united people humbled under God, serving shoulder to shoulder for the sake of his kingdom.

That's your spiritual worship. That's living as living sacrifices to your Lord and your God for his glory. Is it any different for us?

But how much more should it be true for us who live in these last days when the Spirit of God has come upon his church to bring his glory to the very ends of this earth? Everything surely for us must likewise be subordinated in our lives to the building of the body of Christ.

Strive to excel in building the church, says Paul to the Corinthians. To the Philippians, let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ so that I may know that you are standing firm in one spirit with one mind, side by side, striving for the faith of the gospel.

[34 : 07] That's the work of real worship and that is a worshiping church. But if you know that passage in Philippians 1, you'll know that Paul goes on to say immediately, and not frightened in anything by your opponents.

For you, he says, are engaged in the same conflict you saw I had and you hear I still have. The same conflict indeed that Nehemiah was engaged in.

Because real worship does always also involve real warfare and that's what we see in chapter 4, verses 1 to 3. Real warfare that is seen in the sinister hostility of God's enemies.

But when Samballot, the enemy, heard that we were building, he was angry. He was greatly enraged. Now Jesus is clear, isn't he? The apostles are clear. The whole Bible is clear.

To the end, there will be warfare against Christ and his kingdom. And that means that wherever there is real worship, wherever the kingdom is being built and advanced, there will be opposition.

[35 : 16] If a church keeps itself to itself, it can sing and sing and sing all day and all night and the world will leave it alone and never oppose it. If a church talks in platitudes and just apes the culture and supports the things that are big in the culture today like climate change, like sexual equality, like whatever it might be, the church will always be lauded and fettered by the world.

But if the church of Jesus Christ is winning souls for Jesus, especially from those of other faiths, if it is daring to challenge the culture with the word of God and the way of Christ, then, my friends, it will be opposed vehemently and even violently.

It's what you see all through the Acts of the Apostles. It's what we're going to see in the coming chapters in Nehemiah. And ultimately, because it is the same enemy, it is the same tactics.

Assaults from without and sowing discord in amongst God's people. Just note a couple of things here. Note the irrational level of the anger and the rage in Sanballat.

It is very sinister. You can't help thinking of Revelation chapter 12 when John sees this in his great vision. There's a war in heaven and it comes to its climax in the birth of the man-child who is carried up to the throne of heaven.

[36 : 40] It's a vivid depiction of the triumph of Christ. And the devil, the ancient serpent, the dragon, is cast down and he is filled with fury because he knows his time is short.

And he goes off to wage war upon all the offspring of the woman. That is all the people of Christ. He is furious because he knows he cannot win. And we're told that God's providence restrains and the earth protects.

He goes on harrowing and persecuting but he is enraged. And that is exactly what we see here in just one historical example of that playing out on earth. Sanballat is enraged.

He's got the army of Samaria at his hand. He can't do a thing because they have the backing of the king of Persia. So all he can do is shout insults and mockery. A war of words to sap their morale.

Verse 2, you feeble lot. What are you thinking? Sacrifices? Do you think prayer is going to make this wall go up? What a joke. Now the world's jibes are painful and they're very effective often especially because they are sometimes tinged with truth.

[37 : 49] It was true they were a feeble bunch. It was true the task looked extraordinary and they knew it. They were up against the odds. That was how Paul felt wasn't it in his weakness when he went to the great city of Corinth with all its majesty and its buildings with all its grandeur with all its focusing on impressive sounding people impressive looking people.

That's what his enemies said of him that Paul his bodily presence is weak his speech is of no account. Paul knew that and felt that. He tells us in 1 Corinthians 1 he came in weakness in fear in much trembling was very very intimidating for him but he also knew crucially that God loves to use the weak things of this world to confound the strong and the foolish things of this world to confound and shame the wise.

and then Maya knew that too but it can't have been easy must have been very painful very hard to bear and we know that but it's painful and hard for us too isn't it when you're at school and you're mocked and ridiculed for your faith for going to scripture union for going to church on Sunday or in your workplace or in the university or among your friends even in your family it's especially painful from within your family.

and in our society the opposition with faith is mostly still verbal but it's still hard but we must accept it friends ridicule and slander and mockery and intimidation will always be there where there is true worship of the Lord Jesus Christ and if we never experience it we need to remember Jesus' words don't we?

Woe to you when all men speak well of you for so they spoke of the false prophets who were before you. No says Jesus blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and speak falsely against you on my account because that shows that you're in line with the true prophets that shows that you're in line with those like Nehemiah and that shows that great is your reward in heaven.

[40 : 04] But not so for those who do mock you and revile you and ridicule you and my kingdom work. And that's the truth that we can't sidestep or miss in these last verses four and five here because these are words of a real warning aren't they?

A real warning expressed in the solemn horror of God's judgment. In verse one we're told Sanballat hears of the progress of God's kingdom and he rages but look at verse four there's a God in heaven who can hear also.

He hears those taunts and he hears the prayer of his assaulted people. And as we've already seen his hand is powerful. His hand will bring justice.

Now you might wince at Nehemiah's prayer there, do you? Do you think that's not very Christian? Now hold on a minute. These are not his words to his enemies.

They're his response to God, aren't they? And they're not a prayer for personal revenge. Nehemiah is doing exactly what the Apostle Paul tells us to do in Romans 12 verse 19.

[41 : 17] Never avenge yourselves but leave it to the wrath of God for it is written vengeance is mine I will repay. But haven't you taught us that Jesus said we're to forgive all those who wrong us seven times?

In fact even seventy times seven. That's what he says in Matthew 18 verse 21. Yes he does say we have that duty to a brother who sins against us but then seeks forgiveness for their wrong but that's not what's happening here is it?

In fact if you read the rest of Matthew chapter 18 you'll find Jesus talking very very differently about those who make themselves implacable enemies of his fragile little flock.

Better to have a millstone tied around your neck and cast into the depths of the sea than to threaten the future of even one of my little ones says Jesus. Better to lose your limbs all of them than face the fire of hell as a punishment for that.

That's what Jesus says. it's a wonderful comfort to a fragile beleaguered believer facing mockery and insults.

[42 : 30] It's a wonderful comfort to know that the Lord Jesus has the very hairs on your head numbered. Will not let harm come to you ultimately. But by the same token it ought to also strike terror into any who would pit themselves against the precious ones who belong to the Lord of heaven and earth.

Jesus himself tells us in words that are plain and terrible in Matthew chapter 25 that on the day of judgment he will have only one thing to say to those people and it's this listen depart from me you cursed into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels because whatever you did or didn't do to them you did or didn't do to me.

Dear friends Nehemiah's words although they're solemn although they're deeply sobering they simply express God's verdict the verdict of the Lord Jesus himself upon those who will continue persistently to hate his kingdom and hate his people and therefore hate him.

In many ways this whole chapter is the abiding verdict of God. either upon the true worship of God or upon anti-worship which is the refusal of his rule the rejection of his kingdom.

Chapter 3 is a role of honor isn't it? Of God's faithful and true servants who sacrificed everything for his kingdom their safety their wealth their honor who gave everything for building what will last for eternity and their names are recorded in God's book forever their deeds of faith and love to God it is a supreme honor but then verse 5 here in chapter 4 must then be the supreme horror mustn't it?

[44 : 21] To be left to be judged not by God's abundant grace who rewards even what is but our duty because he loves us and because our sin has been blotted out and because our guilt has been covered in Christ but instead of that the horror of meeting the judge of all the earth and being judged solely on our own merits with our guilt not covered with our sin not blotted out from his sight that's also what the apostle John saw in his vision in Revelation 20 wasn't it?

The great white throne in the heavens and all the dead gathered before the throne of Jesus Christ and those faithful words books were opened and everyone was judged according to what was in those books according to what they had done now friends that's one of the most terrifying things I can possibly think of because even though there are a multitude of things I have forgotten and suppressed and pretended away into the background of my memory there is abundantly enough even in what I can remember of what I've done what I've said what I've thought is enough to damn me to a thousand eternities but John saw and another book was opened which is the Lamb's book of life and those who belong to Christ he saw those who belong to him who love him their names are written in that book and so all that judgment against them for what they've done is blotted out and their sin is covered and the risen

Lord says to those servants of his who endure and who conquer I will never blot out his name from my book of life I will confess his name before my father and all the holy angels what a wonderful assurance but the warning in that chapter is also just as real anyone's name is not written in the book of life he was thrown into the lake of fire eternal horror friends that's just the warning that Nehemiah's words here in verse five give us Jesus Christ the Lord of glory will build his church none can prevail against it his walls of salvation are being built around his everlasting kingdom of grace they are going up relentlessly all over the world today just as these walls went up relentlessly verse six we built the wall but today says the

Lord Jesus the gates are still open I am the door this time to humbly seek refuge within his walls of salvation come to me says the Lord Jesus and I will never cast you out of my kingdom there is forgiveness there is a blotting out of sins there is a covering of guilt there is a book of life ready to have your name in it but not forever one day it will be too late the walls will be finished and the gates will be closed and books will be opened those who have resolutely opposed his kingdom those who have refused his grace will hear the words of verse five look at them they will hear them spoken by the

Lord Jesus Christ himself to God the father concerning them and they'll have no one to blame for all eternity but themselves don't let that be you don't let that be you hear the real warning of God's word and join the real worship of God in Jesus name and with Jesus church let's pray our heavenly father we thank you for your grace and mercy that warns us from heaven of the judgment that is to come that every one of us in this room will face and thank you that you urge us receive the grace that is ours fulsome and free in the

[49 : 21] Lord Jesus Christ to join even now the joy of the father's house to join the worship of his everlasting kingdom and so to serve both now and for all eternity and to reign with Christ the king let us pray receive these things with humility and not with stiff and unbending necks for Jesus sake amen to unmanned is all of heaven yüz■ resumes