

Work in the Midst of War

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[0 : 0 0] Well, Paul Brennan is continuing his series in the book of Nehemiah, and we'll open our Bibles now to read that passage together. We'll be looking at Nehemiah 4 and reading verse 1 to 23, and you'll find that in the church Bibles on page 400.

If you don't have a Bible, there are plenty at the side, so please do pick one up or ask one of the stewards, and I'm sure they'd be happy to bring one to you. So continuing in Nehemiah, beginning chapter 4, verse 1.

Now, when Sambalat 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 burn 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 will break down their stone wall.

[1 : 2 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.

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.

So we built the wall, and all the wall was joined together to half its height. For the people had a mind to work. But when Samballot, 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.

[2 : 3 3] 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 ten 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 in construction, and half held the spears, shields, bows, and coats of mail.

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 in the work with one hand and held his weapon with the other.

[3 : 54] And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while 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, That 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. Amen. This is God's Word. Well, good evening.

Please have Nehemiah 4 open and continue our studies in this wonderful, exciting book, Nehemiah. And as we come to this chapter, it is clear that, as is always the case in Christ's church, that God's people will, wherever and whenever they are building for the gospel, wherever they are seeking to build for eternity, they will encounter at some point opposition, conflict.

[5 : 36] Genesis 3.15 sets the agenda for the rest of the Bible, when God promises that there will be enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, until Christ comes and crushes the head of the serpent.

Enmity, conflict, opposition, fighting. Sinclair Ferguson, in a brilliant article, it's called, I think, Preaching Christ in the Old Testament.

In that article, Sinclair Ferguson explains that the Bible is, in one sense, a library of military history. As Satan seeks, ultimately fails, to destroy Christ's people and Christ's church.

Until Christ returns in glory, we will continue to experience the enemy's attack. That is our expectation. The Bible's clear. But we do so, safe in the knowledge of Christ's words, that he will build his church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

Those two realities we need to hold in our minds. Yes, there will be opposition, but in the end, Christ and his church will prevail. And the experience of the church, down through the ages, has been exactly that.

[6 : 55] Conflict. Warfare. But at the same time, huge fruitfulness. Just consider the worldwide church today.

It is growing. Thousands of people every day are turning and following Jesus. The church is growing all over the world. Even in our own nation, there seems to be an explosion of interest in the Bible, in Jesus, and in attending church.

I was showing on Wednesday evening, as we did our everyday evangelism training on Wednesday night, I was showing a recent report from the Bible Society. It just came out the other week. And that indicates a significant growth in church attendance in England and Wales.

It wasn't considering Scotland, I'm afraid. It was focused on England and Wales. But I think we see similar things here. But that report tracked growth in attendance and attitudes to church over the past six years.

So the first study was done in 2018. They repeated the study last year, 2024. And to give you one example of how things have been growing, in 2018, 4% of men aged 18 to 24 said they went to church and believed in Jesus.

[8 : 09] 4%. Last year, that's risen to 21% of 18 to 24 year olds. Massive increase. And it's not just young men. It's across the board. Young women, older men, older women.

The only dip is those like me in middle age, in their 40s. That's where the dip is. But amongst the young, amongst the old, huge increases in church attendance and interest in the gospel.

The church is growing, even in the UK. We have great reasons for optimism as we consider that the harvest is plentiful. But alongside that, this chapter in Nehemiah would remind us of the reality of the enemy.

We are to expect attacks. But the other thing this chapter explains and sets out for us equally clearly, is that such attacks do not deter God's people from the task at hand.

They keep at the work. God's gospel building project must go on. God's people must continue about their work in the midst of war. And that's what we see here in Nehemiah chapter 4.

[9 : 20] If God's people down tools due to the ongoing warfare, then the enemy wins. But the message of this chapter is that God's servants keep going.

They keep on with the task, even in the midst of opposition and warfare. That is the message of this chapter. So we're going to consider under those two broad headings, war and work.

War and work. In the first half of the chapter, we see the various tactics of the enemy as it seeks to destroy and deter God's gospel servants.

And there are three prongs to the attack. We'll consider them in turn. The first line of attack, section 1, verses 1 to 6. The first line of attack is ridicule.

Verses 1 to 6. Ridicule. Look at verse 1. Now when Sanballat heard that they were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged.

[10 : 26] And he jeered at the Jews. We see what is at the root of the opposition that Nehemiah and the people received. And it's ugly, isn't it?

Sanballat was angry, greatly enraged. It is an unhinged anger, a disproportionate anger. Anger because he knows what a real threat Nehemiah and the people really are.

He knows deep down about the God whom Nehemiah belongs to. And of course, behind Sanballat, there stands a bigger enemy. The enemy himself.

We saw that from Genesis 3.15. The seed of the serpent. And that enemy hates God. He hates God to his very core.

And he hates those who seek to build for God's kingdom. This enemy will oppose true gospel building at every turn.

[11 : 31] And that is the reality that we encounter throughout the scriptures. The Old Testament narratives are full of it, aren't they? Enemies seeking to attack and destroy God's people over and over again.

We saw quite recently in Revelation. If you think back, chapters 12 and 13, that reveals and uncovers the real opponents that we encounter as the church today. The beasts.

Do you remember them? Revelation 13. Their intense hatred of God and his church. That is the deeper reality that stands behind the Sanballats of this world.

Behind the opposition that we do see, there stands a greater enemy. And the enemy despises the true church. He despises the fruitful church.

The church that is all about the work of building God's eternal kingdom. The enemy hates that. And when the enemy identifies a church like that, he will attack.

[12 : 31] When the enemy saw Nehemiah return from Jerusalem and get about building again the walls of God's city, he mobilized Sanballats and sent them in. The enemy knew that this city could not be rebuilt.

He knew the promises that God would send to that city a son who would bring salvation to the nations. He could not let it happen. The enemy couldn't let it happen.

And so when the enemy saw this happening, he sent Sanballat in. If Nehemiah had stayed where he was, do you remember he begins chapter 1 in Susa, a Christian job serving the king as his cupbearer?

If Nehemiah had stayed there, Sanballat would have no reason to get angry. It was Nehemiah's clear vision for God's kingdom, his decisive action and going all the way from Susa to Jerusalem to start rebuilding the walls.

That meant that the enemy's sights were then trained on Nehemiah. The enemy was stirred into action because God's servant was stirred into action.

[13 : 42] And here's the thing. To quote one preacher, 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.

Never oppose it. If a church talks in platitudes and just apes the culture, the church will always be lauded and fettered by the world.

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

Now, let me ask this. Have we seen people as a church professing faith in Jesus? Yes.

Have we seen people from other faiths professing faith in Jesus? Yes. Have we got people on the streets proclaiming the truth about abortion? Yes. Do not, therefore, be surprised if we experience opposition and discouragement.

[14 : 55] The enemy is real. He hates the living church. Anger and great enagement are the traits of the enemies of Christ's church.

Some ballots displays them brilliantly. This anger. And it bubbles out in jeering words. What are these feeble Jews doing?

Will they revive the stones out of heaps of rubbish? Deeply hurtful to be mocked like that, isn't it? To be made fun of. No one enjoys that, especially when, in the back of their minds, they know there's something of the truth in what Samballot's saying.

They felt pretty feeble, I'm sure. Almost none of them were expert wall builders.

Some of them were priests. Others were merchants and goldsmiths and perfumers. What did they know about bricklaying? And here they were, trying to rebuild the walls of a whole city. They probably felt utterly inadequate for the task.

[16 : 04] And it's true, they were working amongst heaps of rubble and rubbish. And God's people can easily be discouraged, because the reality is often quite discouraging.

The methods that we employ for building God's kingdom do seem foolish, don't they? They seem feeble. We've been tasked by the Lord Jesus to go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you.

That's the task. The method is through the proclamation of the Word, building churches, speaking, preaching, churches like this. And it really is pretty unimpressive and ordinary in the grand scheme of things, for one perspective.

On the other hand, we know what's happening here is supernatural and amazing. But it looks pretty ordinary. You can imagine the sand ballots of our day, jeering. What are these feeble Christians doing?

Do they really think they can win people to Jesus Christ? They're only a small group in this massive city. They're on the wrong side of history. A bunch of homophobic, transphobic nobodies.

[17 : 26] The institution will collapse at any minute. Who are they? Who do they think they are? It's hard to be despised, isn't it? Nobody enjoys that.

It's very discouraging. Well, how does Nehemiah respond? How do the people respond to this jeering from some ballots?

Well, they do what God's people must always do. They pray to the sovereign laws, and they kept at the work. Look at verse 4. This is Nehemiah now speaking. Hear, O God, for we are despised.

Turn back their taunt on their own heads, and give them up to be plundered in the land where they are captives. 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.

It's a strong, robust prayer, isn't it, from Nehemiah? You can imagine some being a bit squeamish about it. But I think if you were on the ground, if you were there, I don't think you've had any problems with this prayer.

[18 : 37] Nehemiah is very clear on who Sambalat was. He's equally clear on the holiness of the God that he serves. He's hearing Sambalat's insults upon the living God.

He knows that God will not be mocked. God will not tolerate such insolence. Nehemiah's right to pray as he does. He doesn't attack Sambalat, does he?

No, he trusts and turns to the Lord. He's not presuming to take vengeance upon Sambalat. He doesn't take it into his own hands. No, he commits that to the Lord.

And his words, although they're very solemn, although they're deeply sobering, they simply express God's verdict upon those who will continue to persistently hate his kingdom, hate his people, and therefore hate him.

Jesus himself tells us in words that are very plain and very terrible. In Matthew 25, he says that on the day of judgment, he will have only one thing to say to these people.

[19 : 43] 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. How people treat God's people is how they treat God himself.

How Sambalat is treating Nehemiah and God's people is how he's treating God himself, and God will not be mocked. There's a real warning here for those who dare to mock, dare to ridicule God's people.

There is a day of reckoning coming. So they pray. And having prayed, Nehemiah and the others get back to work. Look at verse 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. Derek Kidner says this, They cracked on.

They built regardless. And that needs to be the response from builders of God's kingdom always. When enemies ridicule, we walk by faith.

[21 : 07] Not by what we hear or see. We keep on with the work. We build. We resolve to keep building and not be distracted or discouraged by the taunts of the enemy.

That's the first of these three lines of attack. Ridicule. Number two, verses 7 to 9, is plotting. If Sambalat was angry before, he was absolutely fuming now that the wall was halfway completed.

Look at verse 7. But when Sambalat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashtodites heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and the breaches were being closed, they were very angry.

See, it's not just Sambalat now. The Jerusalem wall builders are literally surrounded by enemies. Sambalat, he was to the north of Jerusalem.

The Arabs were to the south. The Ammonites were to the east. And the Ashtodites were to the west. Surrounded. The coalition against God's builders are grown.

[22 : 17] And they're working together. Look on to verse 8. They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in us. No longer is this just Sambalat and as few of his cronies throwing off insults.

This is a coalition of the angry, who are now strategizing against God's builders. Their hatred is squarely against God's city and everything it represents.

It's against his kingdom. It's against his coming king. It's just what Psalm 2 speaks of, isn't it? About the nations raging and plotting against the Lord and his anointed.

It's exactly what's happening here. And these four groups plot together. They held meetings.

They discussed the progress of the war and their displeasure about it. Nehemiah had to be stopped. They plotted. It's quite chilling, isn't it, to consider that.

[23 : 22] Just as Nehemiah had planned and strategized to build God's kingdom, God's glory. These enemies likewise strategized and planned to tear it down.

We're not to be naive. There are those who meet together in shared grievance about the fruitful church of God and they plot. They strategize about how to bring it down.

And again, note the response from Nehemiah and the others. Just like the church in Acts chapter 4.

They pray to the sovereign God and they keep on doing their kingdom work. Look at verse 9. We pray to our God. The God who, as verse 14 says, who is great and awesome.

The God of heaven. As Nehemiah called him in chapter 2. The God whose hand is good hand is surely on his people to make them prosper. Notice it says we pray.

[24 : 25] They pray together. And so they all knew that they were leaning together on the sovereign Lord. And they knew that prayer moves God's hands.

But we can see here how praying together also motivates God's household. The prayer led to action. There's no sort of pious passivity here.

As one preacher notes, they avoid both the error of self-reliance and that of lazy inertia. They avoid both the sin of panic and the sin of paralysis.

Very easy to do one of those two things, isn't it? When the enemy is coming, surrounding you, you panic. Or you just do nothing. You hunker down. But they do neither of those things.

Because they know the sovereign Lord to who they pray. So yes, they prayed. But they also set a guard. They lived in the real world with real enemies.

[25 : 26] They trust in the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth. But that didn't lead them to thinking that setting a guard was somehow unspiritual. Not at all. They prayed and they set a guard.

And when we face opponents who are set on destroying what we're building, we pray. Of course we do. But we also take action.

We don't panic. We don't do nothing. We use our heads. We use wisdom. We act. Third prong of attack.

Propaganda. Verses 10 to 14. Words are powerful, aren't they? And words that are aimed at discouraging seem much more effective, don't they, than words that are aimed to encourage.

You need about three times as many words of encouragement than discouragement, I think. And the enemy knows that. And so he uses discouraging words in order to bring the work to a standstill.

[26 : 30] This is propaganda designed to intimidate, to stop them working. And it comes from every angle. Look at verse 10. It comes from within Judah. It comes from their enemies, verse 11.

And from fellow Jews outside of Jerusalem, verse 12. And it's what they said that is the focus. It was said, verse 10. Our enemies said, verse 11.

The Jews who lived near them came from all directions and said, verse 12. Words are powerful.

And they can be extremely effective in discouraging God's people, especially when God's people are like this, engaged in hard work.

They're exhausted. They've been building this wall with their bare hands. They're tired, susceptible to discouragement. Notice verse 10. The strength of those who bear the burden is failing.

[27 : 29] There's too much rubble. By ourselves, we will not be able to rebuild the wall. Now, that may all be true. They were very, very tired, I'm sure. The pile of rubble seemed unending.

The wall seemed like it could never be done. The work that we're involved in, the work in the church, may at times be very, very tiring.

The work seems unending. But what can make it all so much worse is when well-meaning folk point such things out. And they go on and on about how hard everything is.

It's the Eeyore's who want to insist the glass is half empty all the time. Probably my natural tendency, so forgive me for that. But it can be quite demoralizing, can't it?

God's people need hope, not despair. And as we'll see, that is what real leadership brings. It brings hope, not despair. That's what Nehemiah does.

[28 : 31] And so just noting that in verse 10, this is from within the people. Let's be careful how we speak within the church.

Let's watch our words. I remember my old pastor saying to me about helping church leaders. He said, always, Paul, always encourage.

Always encourage. That was his words to me. Always encourage. There are also words from the enemy.

Threats to kill. Look at verse 11. They will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work.

Those are words to keep you up at night, aren't they? Imagine being one of those builders in the city walls of Jerusalem, hearing those words circulating. They're going to come in the middle of the night.

[29 : 31] You won't see your head and they're going to kill you. Pretty chilling when you've got your wife and your kids with you. I'm sure they took this threat very seriously.

And for us today, when and if we receive malicious threats against our lives, against the work of the church, threats of legal action or perhaps accusations of hate speech, and in whatever ways the enemy seeks to discourage an attack with words, they really do strike fear into our hearts, don't they?

Even if we know there's nothing whatsoever in the truth of the accusations or the threats, it's still hard. People love nothing more than to believe threats and rumors like that.

We get discouraged. Maybe we should just hunker down, keep our heads down. Let's not make any issues. Let's lay low. It's very discouraging.

And the discouraging words keep coming. Look at verse 12. It seems that the enemy's propaganda has been effective with Jews living a bit away from the Jerusalem wall. They've heard the whisperings.

[30 : 44] They're fearful for their brothers who are inside Jerusalem. And perhaps they're fearful for themselves as well. Sambal and co. Were not people to be messed with.

And so these people outside who lived at a distance, they come from all directions. And they plead with the wall builders to come home. End of verse 12. Ten times they come from all directions.

You can imagine that pressure all come for your own safety. Come back. Pretty hard to keep going when other believers who bought into the propaganda start to plead with you to down tools.

Don't take that costly stand. It won't be worth it. Don't persist with those CBR education displays on the street. It's not worth the flack. It's going to do the church reputational harm.

Don't do it. Stop. The enemy's propaganda comes wave after wave, verses 10 to 12. From every angle.

[31 : 48] Hard to keep going in the midst of that. And this is where strong leadership is so key. And it's strong leadership that Nehemiah provides.

Look at verse 13. Again, the solution to the enemy's threat is both reflective of a trust in the Lord and also a realization that he must act wisely in order to head off the enemy's attack plans.

He knows these threats are real. And so he shores up the defenses, verse 13. And again, Nehemiah uses his head. He thinks strategically.

And he places armed guards in the areas where the wall's defenses were weakest. In the lowest parts, verse 13. In the space behind the walls are stationed people, he says.

With weapons. They're ready. But not only does he act, but he speaks. And in his speech, he lifts the collective eye of the people from the rubble they could see, from the enemies they could see, to the God who they couldn't see.

[32 : 59] His people have been ground down by the relentless words of discouragement, as well as the reality of the hard work they're engaged with. And so Nehemiah lifts their eyes to greater realities.

He simply directs their thoughts once more to their Lord, their sovereign Lord in heaven. Take your eyes off the problems you can see. Take your eyes off the enemies you can see and look to the gods you can't see.

Look at what he says. 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.

Staring words. Remember the Lord whom you serve. He is great. He is awesome. And with these words ringing in their ears, with the sight of their endangered wives and children freshly imprinted on their minds.

And above all, with the great echoes of the Old Testament going back to the days of Moses and Joshua, the great and awesome Lord who would fight for his people. With that vision set before them by Nehemiah, they get back to work with a new, renewed determination, a renewed faith.

[34 : 25] They work. It's pretty amazing, isn't it? Can you imagine being there in Jerusalem, surrounded by enemies, but still the work of the war goes on.

That's the second half of the passage we'll look at more briefly now. They work. Yes, there's war, but work. God's gospel builders will always, always have to deal with opposition and opponents and threats at various points.

But what we see here is the determination to keep out the vital work of gospel building. From verse 15 to the end, we see God's people at work.

Look at verse 15. When the enemies heard that it was known to us that God frustrated their plan, we all returned to the wall, each to his work. From that day on, half of my servants worked construction, and half held spears.

One half stood in close, and armed protection, the other half built. Everyone had weapons to hand, by their sides, and a system was devised to call everyone together, should the enemy attack, the trumpeter would sound, and people would muster together.

[35 : 39] And they continued from dawn to dusk. They worked hard, from the sunrise, to when the stars came out. Nehemiah and his fellow leaders, they didn't even take their clothes off.

They slept in them, ready to go. At no point were they separated from their weapons. See, as long as we are building the kingdom of God, strengthening the church, evangelizing the world, doing what we've been tasked to do by the Lord, we will have attackers on every side.

They'll be there, threatening, seducing, threatening, discouraging, seeking to blunt our influence, neutralize our efforts. But behind them, is a great enemy.

The prince of this world, the father of lies, the accuser. But we must not cease in the work. And even when the moment of imminent threat passes, as it seems to here, they keep on working.

The enemies are backed off by verse 15. Their plot's been foiled. But even then, they press on. They don't stop. They don't become complacent.

[36 : 56] They are prepared to defend, yes, but they also work. Both those things, Nehemiah attends to. Neither one of them could be allowed to prevent the other from happening.

It wasn't all defense. Nor was it all work. The need for defense couldn't stop the wall building, but the wall building couldn't negate the need for defense.

Both had to be looked at. Both had to be done. They couldn't let their guard down. And both of those are needed at times in ministry. In the life of the church, there's going to be needed at times for defense, but not at the expense of the work.

Notice the frequent references to work and building in the second half of this chapter. There could be no let up in God's gospel building project. They persevered.

And so do we. We keep on with the work. And we keep on with the work even when the enemy seems to be circling, when we're surrounded, when we're threatened and discouraged.

[38 : 03] We keep on with the work knowing that verse 20, it's God who fights for us. We belong to Him. We don't need to fear. We can work knowing that the greater reality, confidence, that Christ will build His church, the gates of hell itself will not prevail against it.

And that's the great reality this chapter paints before us. When difficulties arise, when the enemies circle, when the propaganda builds, when the threats come, we don't bury our heads in the sand.

We do defend ourselves, but we do not let up with the work. We keep on proclaiming the gospel. We keep seeking to see people one to salvation.

We seek seeking to help people grow in maturity as Christians. We keep loving each other. We keep serving each other. We keep on with the work. In the midst of war, we work.

That's the message of this chapter. Let's pray, and then we're going to sit around the table together. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray.

[39 : 19] do not be afraid of them remember the lord who is great and awesome father thank you for the perspective your word brings that you are the one who is ultimate and sovereign you are the one who is building your church and there's nothing in this world that will stop it so please encourage our hearts in the midst of our gospel work now so often we are discouraged so often we are aware of the enemies we can see but lord help us to remember the one who we can't see that you are the one who is sovereign and so help us to trust you help us to act wisely should we need to defend ourselves but in the midst of that help us not to lose our joy because we belong to you and we've got work to do please lord help us to be a people that live not by sight but by faith in your promises we ask it in jesus name amen