

Rebuilding the Ruins: A Series in Nehemiah

Rebuilding Despite Opposition (Nehemiah 4:1-23)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on February 25, 2024

Introduction

- ❖ Earlier this month, we started a sermon series working through the book of Nehemiah. Calling it *Rebuilding the Ruins*. We're following the story of how Jerusalem's walls and gates were rebuilt during the era of Persian rule. The city had been previously destroyed by the Babylonians with most of its inhabitants removed and exiled.
 - Nehemiah was an Israelite who rose in the ranks within the royal court. Making it to the top as the king's cupbearer, his most trusted servant. **But even with this amazing job and all its perks, Nehemiah was brokenhearted for the city of Jerusalem. And he felt compelled to go there and help restore the city back to its former glory.** It had been almost a hundred and fifty years since the first exiles returned. But, after all this time, the city walls were still down and the gates still destroyed.
 - So Nehemiah was brokenhearted. And devised a plan to get the king of Persia to fund an expedition to rebuild Jerusalem's walls and gates. That's what we saw back in chapters 1-2. Now chapter 3, last week, was more of a high-level summary of the rebuild – recording *who* did *what* and *where*. It took us out of the narrative and spoke of the wall as a completed project. But in chapter 4, we jump back into the narrative – in the middle of the rebuild.
- ❖ **Now it's worth considering the kind of sacrifice Nehemiah had to make to lead this project.** Remember, he was born in exile. Raised in Persia. He was ethnically Jewish but culturally Persian. So in going to Jerusalem, Nehemiah was not returning home. He never lived there before. His ancestors did. But he was born in Persia. That's his home.
 - So I try to put myself in his shoes. **It would be like me leaving the comfort and familiarity of my life here in Houston and moving to Taiwan.** A place I've never been. A place I don't call home. A place that's important to me. But only because it's important to my parents. It's where they grew up. It's their homeland. I don't have the same kind of emotional investment in Taiwan as they do. Which is understandable.
- ❖ So think of Nehemiah making this long trek to Jerusalem. And working so hard on this wall. And putting up with so much opposition. Not because of a deep, personal, emotional investment in the city. It's not out of patriotism. He's not homesick. Jerusalem is *not* his city.
 - But it is God's. **God chose to attach his name, his glory, his honor to this city. That's the reason Nehemiah is committed to this task.** He'll endure hardships. He'll face opposition. He won't back down. He'll put up a fight if needed. Because this project to rebuild the walls and gates of Jerusalem has no self-serving interest. It's all about God. It's all for God and his glory.
- ❖ And that's critical. That explains Nehemiah's resilience. That's why, under his leadership, the people don't back down. Even in the face of all the mounting opposition recorded in this text. Opposition first arose back in chapter 2 but didn't amount to much. Yet now it's reared its ugly head again. **This is what chapter 4 is about – it's about the opposition that God's people will face whenever we're doing God's work.**

- ❖ **The reality is that if you're doing God's will – if you're walking in obedience to his Word – you're going to face opposition.** Jesus warned his disciples that, in this world, we will have tribulation (Jn 16:33). Many of you can testify to that. You've endured ridicule. You've been left out. You've been misunderstood. You missed opportunities. You were denied advancements. Because you were trying to serve God. You were trying to be faithful.
 - **Now you could let all of that opposition demoralize you.** You could let it deter you from doing God's work. Or you can learn from Nehemiah on how to respond. How to press forward despite opposition.

- ❖ Don't let it weaken your resolve. **Instead, think of opposition and resistance as the means by which God uses to strengthen your resolve.** If you go to the gym, and all you do is stretch. Stretch a whole bunch and go home. You'll be more limber. But you're not getting stronger. **To gain muscle you need to press up against some resistance.** Weights. Bands. Something that pushes back. But when you press through it, that's how you get stronger.
 - **I want to show you how Nehemiah and the people of God pressed through the resistance.** Who pressed on despite the opposition. There are three lessons we can learn from their example. (1) Learn to pray imprecatory prayers. (2) Learn to fight in the wake of the Lord. (3) Learn to construct and contend at the same time.

Learn to Pray Imprecatory Prayers

- ❖ The first lesson is found in vv1-5 and it's to **learn to pray imprecatory prayers.** Now I'll define that term in a minute. But first let's consider the mounting opposition. Look at v1, *"¹Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews."* Sanballat was governor of Samaria, which, at this time, was a province within the Persian empire. Nehemiah, his counterpart, was the governor of Judea (Yehud), the province immediately south of Samaria.
 - So Sanballat is disturbed to hear of their progress in fortifying Jerusalem. **He's "greatly enraged" by the news and responds with some psychological warfare.** He jeers at them with a litany of rhetorical, demoralizing questions. Listen to vv2-3, *"²And 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?" ³Tobiah 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!""*

- ❖ So Sanballat insults them by calling them "*feeble*" and questions their competency to rebuild this wall. *Will they restore it themselves? Will they sacrifice?* Meaning are they ever going to finish the project, which you'd ordinarily conclude with celebratory sacrifices. *Will they finish up in a day?* He's mocking their optimism to even think this project is feasible. **He questions the charred rubble of the former wall, which they're reusing. Will those burnt stones be adequate?** Tobiah – the governor of another neighboring province, Ammon – joins in the jeering. Mocking the sturdiness of the wall. Suggesting that it won't be able to hold the weight of a fox walking on it.

- ❖ **Their insults demonstrate how unfamiliar these men are with the God of Israel. They think the use of broken, burnt stones is shameful.** But they don't realize that that's how God rolls. That's his preference. He chooses to use stones that have been broken and rejected.
 - **Just consider his choice of Jesus. The stone that the builders rejected – who has become the cornerstone in God's plan of redemption (Mt 21:42).** If that's who he chose for the cornerstone, then clearly he has no problem choosing us for his plans. **His preference is to use those of us who have been burnt; who feel broken; who have experienced rejection.** Why? Because when God's surpassing power is displayed in jars of clay like us, he gets the glory (2 Cor 4:7).
 - The enemies of God have no idea who they're dealing with. Their insults fall flat because they think the feebleness of God's people is a liability. When, in fact, our weakness is an asset in the hands of our mighty God.

- ❖ But, even so, God's people may not be aware of that. And could well lose heart in the face of ridicule and resistance. In fact, this strategy worked for opponents back in **Ezra 4:4**. But, this time, they encounter strong spiritual leadership. Represented by Nehemiah himself.
 - Nehemiah didn't fold. He didn't lose heart. And notice how he didn't respond to his enemies in kind. **He didn't engage in a battle of words and insults.** He didn't bother with verbal jarring – issuing rebuttals and counterarguments. No, notice his first response. Which we've seen is his instinctive reaction.

- ❖ **He prays. And notice how it's a very raw prayer.** He doesn't hold back his emotions. You can tell he's upset. He doesn't appreciate these insults. It gets to him. Like it would for any of us. **I think many people have this skewed impression of spiritual leaders – that they have to be these stoic, dispassionate figures who show no emotion.** Which makes some of you think you can never be a spiritual leader. You're too emotional. But just look at Nehemiah. He's upset. He's angry. **But notice how he's taking all that emotion and channelling it in a healthy direction – he brings it to God in prayer.**
 - Listen to vv4-5, *“⁴Hear, 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. ⁵Do 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.”*

- ❖ This is a classic example of an imprecatory prayer. **These are emotional prayers, found in Scripture, where someone is asking God to bring down his judgment upon evildoers** (cf. Ps 109:6-20; Jer 18:18-23). To avenge us for the wrong done to us by the enemy. Punish them justly. Curse them biblically. That's the ask within imprecatory prayers.
 - **Now I know your first thought is that it feels wrong to pray like that.** To ask God to plunder your enemies? To ask God *not* to cover their guilt – to *not* let their sins be blotted out and forgiven? That seems wrong. It seems so vengeful.

- ❖ **But there's no personal vendetta behind Nehemiah's prayer.** It's not motivated by personal vengeance. Notice how he says *to* God that "*they have provoked you to anger.*" They have provoked the Lord – by provoking his people. They have mocked the Lord – by mocking his people. Nehemiah is upset – not because his name or his honor is insulted – but because of the Lord's name and the Lord's honor.
- ❖ **Friends, perhaps you need to learn to pray this kind of prayer. I encourage you to spend more time in the Psalms.** One third of the psalms in the Psalter are classified as lament psalms – where deep emotions of pain and anger are brought to the Lord in prayer. And within that category are the imprecatory psalms (Ps 35, 55, 59, 69, 79, 83, 109, 137, 139).
 - **Spend time in these psalms, and you'll find inspired language for your emotions.** They'll help you express your deep-seated feelings of indignation and frustration. They'll give words to your desire for justice and your repulsion at injustice. And by expressing it all in the form of a prayer, you're ultimately leaving vengeance and vindication in the hands of the Lord.
- ❖ Scripture says to be angry but do not sin (Eph 4:26). Imprecatory prayers help you do that. And as you're telling God why you're upset, you'll start to realize whether your anger is justified or not. Whether it's rooted in self-preservation – in a self-serving cause. Or maybe it's truly rooted in a passion to preserve God's honor – to hallow his name.
 - My point is that **there should be a place for this in your prayer life. Learn the language of imprecatory prayers.** It's how OT saints prayed. But as NT believers, we have to be careful. Careful that our prayers are not motivated by personal spite or revenge. **Remember, we're commanded by Jesus to love our enemies** (Mt 5:44). Which means we should also be praying for their salvation. We should pray for repentance to be granted to our enemies *before* we ask for judgment to befall them.
- ❖ There can be an appropriate context to pray for their punishment. **But pray, first, for your enemies to trust in Christ as the one who took their punishment upon himself as he died on the cross.** We know that's how God's justice was satisfied in our case. May it be the same for our enemies. So learn how to pray imprecatory prayers. They'll help you find that delicate balance between a passion for God's name *and* a duty to love your enemies.

Learn to Fight in the Wake of the Lord

- ❖ So that's the first lesson to learn when trying to respond to opposition in the course of doing God's work. Here's a second lesson found in vv6-14: **Learn to fight in the wake of the Lord.** What I mean is that God's people aren't called to go into battle on the Lord's behalf – to fight *for* victory. **No, we go into battle following the Lord's lead – to fight *from* victory.** The victory he achieved. That's what we mean by fighting in the wake of the Lord. Following in the wake that he leaves behind.

- ❖ Look back at v6, and see that God’s people don’t back down. But press through the resistance and build the wall. And, at this point, they’re halfway through the rebuild. The entire stretch of wall has been connected. But it’s only half of the final height. There’s more to go.
 - But when their enemies hear of the progress, they grow very angry. Listen to vv7-8, *“⁷But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and that the breaches were beginning to be closed, they were very angry. ⁸And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it.”*

- ❖ Notice how the opposition grows. The number of enemies increases. **Jerusalem end up completely surrounded by opposition.** Sanballat and the army of Samaria in the north. Tobiah and the Ammonites in the east. The Arabs in the south. And the Ashdodites in the west. And now they’ve escalated beyond verbal jabs to issuing physical threats of violence.
 - As usual, Nehemiah leads everyone to respond with prayer. Listen to v9, *“And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night.”* **So they have a mind to both pray and prepare.** To trust in the Lord. But at the same time, to take up a defensive posture with a 24/7, around-the-clock guard.

- ❖ This is how men and women of faith deal with opposition. They don’t react with one extreme or the other. **You could just pray – and not prepare.** Let go and let God. Let Jesus take the wheel. Like in a fully-autonomous car. You’re just passively sitting there. That’s one extreme.
 - **Or you could just prepare – and forget to pray.** Your instinct is to rely on yourself or to turn to others. You don’t trust God. You’ve got a tight grip of the wheel. You have to be in control of everything. That’s the other extreme.
 - But what we see in the book of Nehemiah, time and time again, is that the people of God pray *and* prepare. They trust God and they take responsibility.

- ❖ But notice how, starting in v10, all this mounting opposition is starting to wear on them. The builders are beginning to grow faint of heart. *“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.” ¹¹And our enemies said, “They will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work.” ¹²At that time the Jews who lived near them came from all directions and said to us ten times, “You must return to us.””*

- ❖ **Sadly, they’re starting to believe the lies of their enemies. They’re starting to doubt themselves.** In v11, the threats increase. And in v12, their family members, who live in nearby towns grow worried for them. They keep urging the builders – ten times over – to abandon the project and return home for their own safety. They fear an imminent attack.
 - All of this is wearing on them. They’re starting to lose hope. Notice why in v10. **They’re too focused on the *what* of their project that they’ve lost sight of the *who* and the *why*.** They’re fixated on the vast quantity of rubble and the meager amount of available workers. They’re attention is on the what. What they need, most urgently, is to be reminded of the *who* and the *why*. Who is calling you to this project and why?

- ❖ That's what Nehemiah stresses in the following verses. In v13, he pauses the rebuild. He arms the builders and strategically stations them in sections of wall that were unobstructed and low enough for their enemies to see them rallied together and arrayed for battle.
 - **And in v14, Nehemiah gives his pregame locker room speech.** His Braveheart, For Frodo rally cry. *“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.””*

- ❖ **Remember the *who*.** Remember the Lord. The great and awesome God. Who fights for you. **And remember the *why*.** You don't fight for yourself – for self-preservation, for self-interest. You fight for others. For your loves ones and their good. For God and his glory.
 - Later on in v18, we read that the men of Israel kept building the wall, but from this point on they were armed with swords strapped to their sides. And Nehemiah arranged for a trumpeter to never leave his side. So that if the enemy attempts something, Nehemiah would rush to the point of attack and others would rally to the sound of the trumpet. Listen to v20, *“In the place where you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us.”*

- ❖ That's the point: **God is going to fight for us.** He's the Lord of Hosts, the Lord of Angel Armies. Who's already won the battle! **It's a different experience fighting for victory – to achieve victory – versus fighting from victory.** Fighting in the wake of someone else's victory won on your behalf.
 - The story of David and Goliath illustrates this perfectly. Imagine you're in the army of Israel. Before the battle, you're understandably nervous. You're about to fight the Philistines. And they have a giant on their side! The odds don't look good. The outcome is uncertain. Having to fight *for* victory is terrifying!
 - But then you hear someone has volunteered to be Israel's champion. In ancient times, battles could be decided by each side sending a champion to fight on their behalf. **If your champion wins, his victory is your victory.** But if your champion loses, his defeat is your defeat. That's how it works.

- ❖ So at first you're relieved. Until you see your champion step onto the battlefield. A shepherd boy without any armor and armed with a slingshot and five stones. The odds look like they've gotten worse. **But when the dust clears, it's your champion standing victorious.**
 - Suddenly, there's a resounding shout of victory on your side. Trumpets blare and a battle cry is issued. You go rushing into the valley in pursuit of a retreating army. The victory is won. The enemy is defeated. But you'll still face some resistance. There's still some opposition. You're still going to have to fight. But now you're fighting *from* victory. You're fighting with confidence. You're fighting with freedom.
 - **There's a difference in fighting for an uncertain victory versus fighting from a decisive victory.** It changes your attitude and motivation structure when you know your champion has already won and the victory is yours.

- ❖ Friends, in the course of your Christian life, you're going to face opposition. If you're committed to doing God's work, to doing his will, you're going to experience resistance and push back. **But you're called to fight the good fight of the faith** (1 Tim 6:12).
 - The good news is that you're fighting in the wake of the Lord and his ultimate victory on the cross. **That's where Jesus functioned as your Champion and fought your greatest enemies – sin, death, and the devil.** He achieved a decisive victory that extends to you if you trust in him.
 - So prepare yourself for opposition. Be ready to defend the faith. Be ready to defend the good work of ministry that you've been called to do. If someone tries to discredit it, to tear it down, don't just passively stand by. Be strong and courageous. **But remember that you're fighting in the wake of the Lord Jesus and his victory on the cross.** Which is meant to shape your attitude and motivation as you fight the good fight of the faith.

Learn to Construct and Contend at the Same Time

- ❖ So we've considered two lessons for how to respond to opposition in the course of doing God's will. Here's a third lesson found in vv15-23: **Learn to construct and contend at the same time.** That's the strategy Nehemiah had to adopt from this point on. In v15, it says the enemies realized their plans were revealed and the builders were armed and ready to repel their attack. So they abandoned their plans and the men of Jerusalem returned to the wall and continued their work. But, as we read in v16, *"From that day on, half of my servants worked on construction, and half held the spears, shields, bows, and coats of mail."*
 - Nehemiah organized them into two groups where they took shifts when it came to building and defending. Half were constructing. Half were contending. I like how it says in v17 that *"each labored on the work with one hand and held his weapon with the other."* **In one hand they held a sword. In the other hand they held a trowel.** That's the hand-tool a stonemason uses to apply mortar to bricks.

- ❖ Inspired by this passage in Nehemiah 4, Charles Spurgeon named his church's magazine *The Sword and the Trowel*. **The famous 19th-century London pastor viewed his church's ministry as bifurcated with these two tasks of constructing *and* contending.** Building up the church *and* defending the faith. One directional churches and church leaders are rarely healthy. They need to be multidirectional. Laboring to build each other up in the faith while also defending the faith and resisting false teachings.
 - That doesn't mean every ministry a church organizes always has to include both activities simultaneously. **Sometimes the circumstances will call for constructing. At other times and in other circumstances, you'll need to contend.** Just think of the NT book of Jude. He wrote his letter with the original intent to construct but then – after hearing that false teachers had crept into the church – he realized he needed to pivot and focus on contending. Listen to **Jude 1:3**, *"Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints."*

- ❖ Sometimes it's appropriate to just encourage each other in the faith, to build each other up, enjoying our common salvation. But sometimes it's necessary to defend the faith – to expose false teaching and to equip the saints to detect bad theology and to respond with clear, winsome, biblical teaching.
 - **That's why we look forward to hosting Houston Christian University's Apologetics Day Conference on Saturday, March 23rd.** The theme is geared towards preparing us for Holy Week and our celebration of Good Friday and Easter Sunday. It's called Defending Easter. And a world renowned Christian apologist named William Lane Craig and an expert NT scholar Michael Licona will be presenting along with other workshop speakers.
 - You should join us. So you can be equipped with a sword. Or you can sharpen the sword you already have. It's important that Christians know what they believe; know how to explain it; and how to defend it.

- ❖ **Which activity feels more comfortable and more natural to you? Building others up in the faith? Or defending the faith?** Constructing or contending? Figure that answer out and then make it a goal to strengthen your hand in the other one.
 - Don't put it off. Don't let down your guard. **Consider how vigilant Nehemiah and the builders were.** Listen to v23, *“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.”*
 - They never took off their clothes or armor. They slept in it. They bathed in it. They were always ready to either build or defend. To either construct or contend. **Likewise, you and I are called to be ready to preach the gospel and defend the gospel in season and out of season (2 Tim 4:2).**