

Nehemiah 4

Sanballat was very angry when he learned that we were rebuilding the wall. He flew into a rage and mocked the Jews, saying in front of his friends and the Samaritan army officers, "What does this bunch of poor, feeble Jews think they're doing? Do they think they can build the wall in a single day by just offering a few sacrifices. Do they actually think they can make something of stones from a rubbish heap—and charred ones at that?"

Tobiah the Ammonite, who was standing beside him, remarked, "That stone wall would collapse if even a fox walked along the top of it!"

Then I prayed, "Hear us, our God, for we are being mocked. May their scoffing fall back on their own heads, and may they themselves become captives in a foreign land! Do not ignore their guilt. Do not blot out their sins, for they have provoked you to anger here in front of the builders."

At last the wall was completed to half its height around the entire city, for the people had worked with enthusiasm.

But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs, Ammonites, and Ashdodites heard that the work was going ahead and that the gaps in the wall of Jerusalem were being repaired, they were furious. They all made plans to come and fight against Jerusalem and throw us into confusion. But we prayed to our God and guarded the city day and night to protect ourselves.

Then the people of Judah began to complain, "The workers are getting tired, and there is so much rubble to be moved. We will never be able to build the wall by ourselves."

Meanwhile, our enemies were saying, "Before they know what's happening, we will swoop down on them and kill them and end their work."

The Jews who lived near the enemy came and told us again and again, "They will come from all directions and attack us!" So I placed armed guards behind the lowest parts of the wall in the exposed areas. I stationed the people to stand guard by families, armed with swords, spears, and bows.

Then as I looked over the situation, I called together the nobles and the rest of the people and said to them, "Don't be afraid of the enemy! Remember the Lord, who is great and glorious, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes!"

When our enemies heard that we knew of their plans and that God had frustrated them, we all returned to our work on the wall. But from then on, only half my men worked while the other half stood guard with spears, shields, bows, and coats of mail.

The leaders stationed themselves behind the people of Judah who were building the wall. The labourers carried on their work with one hand supporting their load and one hand holding a weapon. All the builders had a sword belted to their side. The trumpeter stayed with me to sound the alarm.

Then I explained to the nobles and officials and all the people, "The work is very spread out, and we are widely separated from each other along the wall. When you hear the blast of the trumpet, rush to wherever it is sounding. Then our God will fight for us!"

We worked early and late, from sunrise to sunset. And half the men were always on guard. I also told everyone living outside the walls to stay in Jerusalem. That way they and their servants could help with guard duty at night and work during the day. During this time, none of us—not I, nor my relatives, nor my servants, nor the guards who were with me—ever took off our clothes. We carried our weapons with us at all times, even when we went for water.

"Mock Them!"

There's an infamous Brit who doesn't believe in God and is unnecessarily hostile to Christians. One thing he encourages his 'followers' to do is mock Christians and insult them.

He's not the first person to try this tactic. Back in Nehemiah 4 we find another couple of people trying the same thing. Their names were Tobiah and Sanballat – along with a bunch of others. They made all kinds of threats, and insulted Nehemiah and the other Jews. Just so you know and can take a stand – something we're seeing happening today is increasingly Jews being insulted and attacked worldwide. It's something we need to stand against.

Sanballat and Tobiah tried to make the people doubt what they were doing. This is something that Satan tried back in Genesis when he tried to make Adam and Eve doubt what God had said and really who God was.

What was the reason for these insults and threats? The reason was that a man called Nehemiah had gone back to Jerusalem and was building the walls back up around the city. He'd found the city in ruins and wanted to rebuild. Not exactly a crime but the enemies around weren't happy because they didn't want God's people to have a place to be and to grow in number. It didn't suit their purposes, plans, ideas and agendas and they felt threatened.

Sounds familiar of what's happened to the church through history... Every time God starts doing amazing things, enemies start appearing in the strangest places – often from other Christians as well as from those who don't believe in God.

I had a friend who did some Religious Education lessons in school and then was subject to all kinds of abuse, threats and intimidation from a parent and an organisation who don't believe in God. My friend had done nothing wrong and was fully supported by the school but it shows what can happen when people get angry about God's work.

Anger, Doubt, Fear

Back in Nehemiah 4, Sanballat and Tobiah got more angry and started to threaten the people. They made threats that wherever the Jews were, they would come in and kill them and put an end to the work of rebuilding the walls. We often see that when people don't like what God says through the Bible because they want to do what's wrong, they get angry – really angry! You can often tell how wrong something is compared to the Bible by the amount and type of opposition that rises up!

Around the world today, many thousands of Christians are persecuted because of their belief in God. They have homes burned down, property taken from them, lose their jobs, have churches closed, are unable to access some services, are locked in shipping containers, are driven out of their family homes and villages and are killed. Even in the UK, some Christians who have said things supporting the Bible have had death threats as well as losing jobs, friends and reputation.

When Sanballat, Tobiah and the peoples got upset with the rebuilding of the wall, fear and doubt began to rise up in the hearts of the Jews. They got worried and this was understandable! They started thinking there would be threats from every direction. When people start to get threatening and angry and abusive, it is intimidating – that is why people use it as a tactic to get their own way.

Think about the playground and the school bullies who get their way through fear, threats and violence. What was happening in Nehemiah 4 was the same – the bullies all ganged up to use threats and violence to get their way. We see the same things happening today with all kinds of groups using these tactics around the world to get their own way – the street gangs, the mafia, political groups, action groups and groups promoting their own interests. Interestingly it seems to only be Christians who don't do this kind of thing!

The Answer to the Fears

So what do we do when we see all kinds of threats and people who hate God getting angry towards Christians? Do we back down and go quiet, like we often do as Christians? Do we stop talking out loud or do we go silent? What is the right approach? It can be really hard..

1. Prayer

The first thing that Nehemiah did was not to respond to their enemy directly. The very first thing he did was to go to God. He said to God, 'listen to their threats and insults which they are throwing at us – give us justice!'

We need to know that God is a God of justice. Many things happen in the world that we don't understand but don't think for one minute that God doesn't see, hear, understand or know what's going on. God is a God of justice and in 'due time' (see Galatians 6.9) God will step in. Sometimes God deals with the enemies and sometimes he strengthens us to stand. Psalm 23 talks about God 'prepares a feast' (does good) for us in the presence of our enemies. God is with us every step of the way.

One day Jesus will return and bring justice. This is a truth that should give us real hope! God will bring justice to every situation where there has been injustice and his solution is always perfect. We may not see the justice but God will have his way in his time. Hold onto this truth and know that God does answer our prayers, is for us and will help us.

2. Action

Second, Nehemiah took action to fight both the threats of the enemies and the negativity that was beginning to surround the work of the Jews. When you start to feel discouraged or fearful, it's not time to retreat but to take action. Joyce Meyer often says if you're worried, fearful or need a breakthrough then go and do something for someone else; if you want to fight the evil that satan does then go out and do good instead!

The Bible book of James tells us that 'faith without works is dead.' (James 2.26). What he means is that when we think about what faith looks like, it looks like action – doing something. This is what Nehemiah did. He sorted some of the people to work and others to stand guard with weapons. As the threats against them increased, so Nehemiah increased the defences. He didn't attack but he went on the 'offensive'. This means he took action ahead of time to stop any potential attack against him.

The Bible tells us that our fight is not against people but against the evil forces that we can't see but that are 'pulling the strings' when people do evil. So the real powers are not people but the evil powers causing people to do evil.

So we can take action in prayer, asking God to help us, to change people's hearts and to bring his truth. We can also take action to help this happen. We can support people going through hard times, we can give money to organisations supporting Christians, we can make a stand by speaking God's truth in love and we can act where we see injustice. We can also declare God's Word out loud privately or in our minds about situations. For example Isaiah 54.17 is a good place where we speak God's promises to us about specific situations. So we take the word of God and apply it (like a medicine or like a shield of protection or a sword of defence).

So we can pray: *'God, no weapon turned against me will succeed and God you silence every voice raised up to accuse me. What has been said against me is wrong and you will show it to be wrong. This is what you do for those who love you and you will be my defence and you will prove me to be right and prove your Word to be right.'*

One time in school I had a supervisor who was a bit hostile towards me. I prayed that God would help me and show I wasn't doing anything wrong but only doing good. (I was trying to help students who were out of class). The next week we had a session where we met others in the school and told them what we did. We then fed back what we'd learned. The lady who was with me said 'I think what you do is amazing and every school in the country should have someone like you in it.' The lady who had abused me was in the room and heard these words. I thanked God afterwards that he had answered my prayer and that others realised what I did was good.

We should never be hostile or abusive or do anything without having God's love in our hearts. Many times Christians can come across like they are shouting and pointing. But Jesus was never like this towards people – he always did good to overcome evil.

We also have two more powerful 'weapons'. The Bible tells us to forgive those who persecute us and then to actually pray for them, bless them and do good even to those who may be abusive to us. This is so counter-cultural that people sit up and notice.

I've seen many incidents of Christians publicly forgiving those who have done wrong to them and seen how people see Christians more positively and want to know more about God. These are the kinds of 'weapons' that we can use to take action.

Pray, Act, Forgive, Bless

Do you need to do any of these today? Ask God to show you if there's anything he wants you to pray about; take action in; anyone you need to forgive; anyone he wants you to do good towards (that's what 'bless' means). As you do this, you do God's work, you do good and you can see things turn around. Just like Nehemiah did as he saw the Jewish people come back to their land and back to God.