

# Nehemiah 4: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Nehemiah chapter 4. Now when Sambalot 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 are they building? If a fox goes up on it, he will 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 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. 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 on 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 on the work with one hand, and held his weapon with the other. 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, Let every man and his servant pass the night within Jerusalem, that they may be a guard for us by night, and may labor by day. So neither I nor my brothers nor my servants, nor the men of the God who followed me, none of us took off our clothes. Each kept his weapon at his right hand.

The rebuilding of the wall does not occur without substantial opposition. In Nehemiah chapter 4, Sambalat, the governor of Samaria, and Tobiah the Ammonite resist the Jews' efforts with taunts and plots. Having heard about the rebuilding of the wall, Sambalat ridiculed the Jews publicly, before his fellow rulers and his army. He insists that the Jews are pathetic and insufficient for the task. They would not be able to restore the wall without external help, and none would be forthcoming from their neighbors. Even were they to appeal to their God, in whom they were apparently placing their trust, his strength would not be enough. Their efforts were futile and doomed. They didn't seem to appreciate the scale of the task ahead of them. This was not the task of a single day.

[ 4 : 07 ] A new wall would not easily be established from a burned rubble of the old demolished one. Tobiah the Ammonite, like a cartoon sidekick, adds his own dismissive taunt to Sambalat's.

The wall of the Jews is so weak that even a fox clambering up on it would threaten its integrity. An impenetrable defense for the city it certainly is not. Nehemiah wisely does not seem to retort to the taunts of the opponents, or enter into a sparring match with his adversaries. Rather, he turns to the Lord, putting matters in his hands.

He calls for the Lord to attend to the situation faced by the builders. The Lord and his people are despised and ridiculed by these rulers, and Nehemiah records in what was presumably his memoirs, his prayer that the Lord bring them to account for their sin.

Nehemiah and the builders have not sought to attack Sambalat and his confederates, but they have threatened and ridiculed the Jews without any cause. Nehemiah's prayer here is akin to those found in the imprecatory Psalms of scripture. This is one of several occasions in scripture where we see imprecatory prayer being used in more specific historical circumstances.

Andrew Steinman and other commentators note the close verbal resemblance between the first half of verse 5 and Nehemiah chapter 18 verse 23. Yet you, O Lord, know all their plotting to kill me. Forgive not their iniquity, nor blot out their sin from your sight. Let them be overthrown before you. Deal with them in the time of your anger.

[ 5 : 37 ] Nehemiah is not taking vengeance. Rather, he turns to the Lord, to whom vengeance belongs. The enemies of the Jews will only bring disaster upon themselves by their strife.

The builders persevere with their project and achieve considerable success, as, while much work remains, they have established a complete wall around the circumference of the city, to half the intended height of the final wall. The most potent response that they can give to the taunts of their adversaries is prayer and effective labour. Word once again reaches the adversaries of the Jews. Sambalat, Tobiah, the Arabs, Ammonites and the Ashdodites. The Jews have enemies on all sides, and they all seem to be in league with each other against Judah. Sambalat has power in the north, in Samaria. Tobiah and the Ammonites hold power to the east. The Arabs are to the south of the Jews. Ashdod, a Philistine city, is to the west. Now they all move beyond taunts, to plots, conspiring together to fight against Jerusalem and to prevent the wall building by force.

They do not want to tolerate the rising up of the Jews as a power and presence in their region again. Nehemiah and the Jews get wind of their plots, turn to God in prayer, and take action to secure the city and the wall building. Morale, however, fell in Judah, following the threat of military force being used against them, while they were still so vulnerable, and the daunting scale of the task remaining. Soon there were those in Judah who were echoing the taunts of Sambalat from earlier in the chapter, now as expressions of depression, despair and dismay. Soon the builders were facing opposition from their own surrounding Jewish countrymen also, who, realizing that they would be the first to be attacked if the adversaries came up against Jerusalem, sought to dissuade the builders in order to appease the threatening neighbors. The project is starting to seem quite precarious at this point. Nehemiah, however, posted men at all of the vulnerable points in the wall and exhorted the disheartened people.

While they might face opposition on all sides, threatening to extinguish the light of Judah, ultimately their opponents would not have the best of any conflict, as the Lord is with his people.

At each point, he had been equipping his people, stirring up the hearts of kings and rulers, providing for their necessities, and enabling them to overcome opposition. They must trust him at this crucial point too. He will fight for them. The enemy's hope seemed to be that letting out the rumor of an attack upon Jerusalem would be enough to get the Jews to back down and abandon the building project. The fact that they had responded by strengthening their defenses and Nehemiah had been able to restore the resolve of the people greatly frustrated their plan. They had presumed that their barking would be sufficient and wouldn't need to be followed by any bite. It seems that Nehemiah ended up calling their bluff. From that point onwards, however, the rebuilding work had to be undertaken with military force and strategy, each builder also functioning as a soldier and guard and watchman, equipped with a weapon along with his building tools. Given the scale of the task still to be undertaken, and the many points of potential weakness remaining in the wall, Nehemiah also had to prepare the people so that men could rally quickly to any point in the wall where an assault might come.

[ 8 : 56 ] So vigilant was Nehemiah and his companions that all remained dressed and armed at all times, ready to be called to the defense of the city in a moment. A question to consider. How does this chapter resemble earlier scriptural accounts of holy war?

Can you think of similarities with any specific stories?