

Chapter Four

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. Why do you suppose Sanballat didn't want a wall around Jerusalem?
2. How many times did Jerusalem's enemies attack the city?
3. What do you think was Israel's most important tool for overcoming obstacles?
4. What percentage of the men worked, and what percentage were on military duty?

OUTLINE

Chapters 4 - 6 describe the building of the walls with varying obstacles and opposition.

- D. The enemies try ridicule and rumor to block construction.
1. Their enemies try to block them with ridicule (vss. 1-6).
 2. They spread rumors of impending attack (vss. 7-14).
 3. Work progresses in spite of these (vss. 15-23):

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

- D. The enemies try ridicule and rumor to block construction.
1. Their enemies try to block them with ridicule.

TEXT, 4:1-6

- 1 Now it came about that when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became furious and very angry and mocked the Jews.
- 2 And he spoke in the presence of his brothers and the wealthy men of Samaria and said, "What are these feeble Jews doing? Are they going to restore it for themselves? Can they offer sacrifices? Can they finish in a day? Can they revive the stones from the dusty rubble even the burned ones?"
- 3 Now Tobiah the Ammonite was near him and he said, "Even what they are building—if a fox should jump on it, he would break their stone wall down!"

- 4 Hear, O our God, how we are despised! Return their reproach on their own heads and give them up for plunder in a land of captivity.
- 5 Do not forgive their iniquity and let not their sin be blotted out before Thee, for they have demoralized the builders.
- 6 So we built the wall and the whole wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work.

COMMENT

In *verse 1* we read of Sanballat's anger on hearing of progress on construction of the wall. Many times the enemy of the Lord's work exposes himself by this means today. Perhaps he did not want the wall built because it would make it difficult for him to attack and rob the city; his opposition is hard to explain otherwise. Strong defenses at Jerusalem could pose no threat to the safety of Samaria. His first stage of opposition consequently was ridicule; so must the Lord's people be prepared to deal with this tool which the Devil still uses.

Verse 2 gives the details of his mockery. See if any of it sounds familiar today. (1) The reference to the Jews as feeble (drooping, languishing) may be a subtle suggestion that if they had been tending their crops instead of working on the walls, they wouldn't be as weak from hunger now. What food for his stomach does one get from building walls, or going to church to listen to sermons? (2) The meaning of the next phrase, "restore it for themselves," is vague, and translations vary: it contains the ambiguous word from 3:8, which literally means, "to cut loose or free, leave." One thing is clear: the emphasis on "for themselves." What did they think they could do by themselves, without Sanballat's help? (3) The next two phrases may go together, and imply that the Jews would be foolish to think that by making sacrifices to God they could gain His favor and be able to finish their work quickly, "in

a day”; i.e., worship is futile, and such ideas are nonsense. Or we may see in the phrase, “can they offer sacrifices?” the implication that since the wall is not needed to enable them to make sacrifices, they must be building it to lead to a rebellion. Then the next phrase, “Can they finish it in a day?” has the contemptuous idea that the Jews would lose heart and would not stay with the work to its completion. (4) The last remark was an invitation to look at the rocks and rubbish before them; that would be enough to discourage anybody!

Verse 3 indicates the close tie between Sanballat of Samaria and Tobiah of Ammon, on opposite sides of the Jordan. The evaluation of the wall, that it would be no match for even a fox, i.e., jackal, was pure caricature and not argument.

The tone of *verses 4, 5* indicates that all of *vss. 2, 3* were spoken audibly before Jerusalem. Nehemiah’s instantaneous reaction was a brief prayer. This characteristic of the man appeared before, at 2:4; it will crop up several more times.

Nehemiah’s requests were that God would be conscious of the way they were being ridiculed, and that their enemies be repaid for their evil blocking of God’s approved plan. The imprecatory nature of the prayer is similar to that in a few of the Psalms (69:27f, for example). Let us not judge him by a morality which God would reveal through His Son several centuries later; we are bound, as he was not, to pray for our enemies; but it is true that the consequences which he asked are the natural outcome in this world of the kinds of evil being committed by their enemies. It is well for us to be warned, lest we suffer a similar fate.

Verse 5 happily records that because the people put their heart into their work (“mind” is literally “heart”), the work progressed to the halfway stage. The word “height” is a conjecture; it is missing in the Hebrew text: we could substitute “width” or simply say it was half-finished just as accurately. Work was progressing throughout its whole length, according to chapter three. Note also Nehemiah’s taking no credit to himself; it was the people who were responsible.

2. The Jews faced the menace of an attack.

TEXT, 4:7-14

- 7 Now it came about when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites heard that the repair of the walls of Jerusalem went on, and that the breaches began to be closed, they were very angry.
- 8 And all of them conspired together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause a disturbance in it.
- 9 But we prayed to our God, and because of them we set up a guard against them day and night.
- 10 Thus in Judah it was said,
 “The strength of the burden bearers is failing,
 Yet there is much rubbish;
 And we ourselves are unable
 To rebuild the wall.”
- 11 And our enemies said, “They will not know or see until we come among them, kill them, and put a stop to the work.”
- 12 And it came about when the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times, “They will come up against us from every place where you may turn,”
- 13 then I stationed men in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, the exposed places, and I stationed the people in families with their swords, spears, and bows.
- 14 When I saw their fear, I rose and spoke to the nobles, the officials, and 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 houses.”

COMMENT

Now begins the second stage of opposition, the threat of actual hostility.

Verse 7 spells out the sources of their opposition, from all four

directions. To the north was Sanballat, representing the Samaritans. To the northeast was Tobiah and the Ammonites. The Arabs would include Edom, to the south and east; and Ashdod lay to the southwest of Jerusalem, along the coast, among the descendants of the Philistines. This opposition arose before the gaps in the wall had been entirely closed.

In *verse 8*, their conspiracy was not directed to the military destruction of Jerusalem: they had insufficient armies for that, thanks to Persia's control over all of them; but they could create confusion and stop the work in that manner.

Nehemiah's response in *verse 9* was prayer, first of all. But it was combined with works; he posted an around-the-clock guard.

The poetic form of *verse 10* shows that it was an oft-repeated saying. If we see discouragement in it, the frustration of long hours already invested and still as many hours of toil lying ahead, there is also hope and confidence in it; it is the kind of song that would encourage them to grit their teeth and continue on. The reference to failing strength may be another clue to the fasting and privation necessitated by their work.

In *verse 11*, we hear their enemies threaten, perhaps pretending secrecy but intending for the threats to be reported to the Jews, to appear from nowhere and destroy the builders.

Verse 12 shows that their message was reported to the Jews. The persons doing the reporting were the workmen who came from outlying towns; people from Tekoa eleven miles south, from Gibeon and Mizpah a comparable distance to the north, and from half a dozen other localities mentioned in chapter three were all helping. The "ten times" is just a way of saying "repeatedly": cf. Gen. 31:7.

Verse 13 gives more information on Nehemiah's defense. Since the city lacked a professional army, he stationed people from the various families (clans) at the more vulnerable locations.

We see the reality of the situation in *verse 14*: the visible fear, and Nehemiah's effort to reassure them and spur them on. His arguments were good ones: (1) remember the power and greatness of God (from which their strength came), and (2) think of the

brothers, children, wives, and homes they were fighting to protect (which would give them an immediate, visible incentive).

3. Work progresses in the midst of precautions.

TEXT, 4:15-23

- 15 And it happened when our enemies heard that it was known to us, and that God had frustrated their plan, then all of us returned to the wall, each one to his work.
- 16 And it came about from that day on, that half of my servants carried on the work while half of them held the spears, the shields, the bows, and the breastplates; and the captains were behind the whole house of Judah.
- 17 Those who were rebuilding the wall and those who carried burdens took their load with one hand doing the work and the other holding a weapon.
- 18 As for the builders, each wore his sword girded at his side as he built, while the trumpeter stood near me.
- 19 And I said to the nobles, the officials, and the rest of the people, "The work is great and extensive, and we are separated on the wall far from one another.
- 20 "At whatever place you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us."
- 21 So we carried on the work with half of them holding spears from dawn until the stars appeared.
- 22 At that time I also said to the people, "Let each man with his servant spend the night within Jerusalem so that they may be a guard for us by night and a laborer by day."
- 23 So neither I, my brothers, my servants, nor the men of the guard who followed me, none of us removed our clothes, each took his weapon even to the water.

COMMENT

Verse 15: If it had been the plan of Judah's enemies to create confusion to hinder the work, the plan failed: they heard that the

Jews responded to the threats by organizing adequate defenses. Nehemiah gives credit to God for the outcome; the emphasis is not on their avoiding attack, but on their being able to continue their work. All we have seen so far are threats; their enemies may not have had the heart, or intention, to risk health or life for their evil ends.

Nehemiah's servants, *verse 16*, may have been his bodyguard of Persian soldiers. The presence of the captains behind the house of Judah could be physical; but it could speak more pointedly of their moral support.

The workmen in *verse 17* could continue hauling materials with one hand, and could use the other hand for weapons.

The workmen in *verse 18*, stone masons most likely, would need both hands for their work, so they kept their weapons close by.

At the end of *verse 18* and in *verses 19, 20*, communication was provided for. It was well over half a mile from the northern to the southern extremities of the wall, so a loud signal was needed if they were to be summoned to one another's defense. The shofar (trumpet), made of the curved horn of a cow or ram, was the answer. With this reassurance against surprise attack, and with the added assurance of God's assistance, they could work more efficiently.

In *verse 21*, though their work force was cut in half by their need of defense, they could make up a part of this by working from dawn to dusk.

According to *verse 22*, additional efficiency would be obtained by keeping all the workers within the city each night. The teaming of a skilled and unskilled laborer may be suggested by the mention of a man and his servant. The availability of the workmen as guards during the night is cited; there would be other advantages to the stratagem. It had been the workers who came from outside the city who brought the rumors in *verse 12*; this would cut off that avenue of subversion. It would also prevent defections from their work force, and at the same time speed construction by eliminating travel time. There may be a hint in this passage on how to get along with people; the only reasons which Nehemiah expressed for keeping men in the city were those which showed no

lack of confidence in, or disrespect for, his workmen. The practice of hospitality by the residents of the city would be needed to make this method succeed.

Verse 23 emphasizes once more the urgency of their work, that they kept their clothes on continuously. The last phrase of the verse is obscure. Literally it reads, "each one his weapon to the water." The KJV interprets it to mean that they did remove their clothes to wash them; sanitation must not be neglected. The *Anchor Bible* assumes that it is necessary to make some small corrections in the text; it reads, "each one had his spear in his right hand," to indicate constant readiness. The *Cambridge Bible* adds still more and suggests, "each one with his weapon in his hand for a full month of days." The NASB stresses that they took their weapons everywhere, even to get a drink or to bathe. The *Living Bible* simply tries to capture the sense: "And we carried our weapons with us at all times."

WORD STUDIES

WEALTHY (vs. 2: Chayil): in various contexts, it can mean (1) strength, might, valor; (2) forces, army; (3) ability, wealth; (4) integrity, virtue. It is usually translated "army," but "wealth" in Ruth 2:1, where it describes Boaz.

The two most important letters in the word are the "h" and "l"; these appear in our words "heil," "hale," "heal," "health," "whole," and even "holy": words having the same sense as the Hebrew, in certain contexts. They also occur in a word of very different derivation, but with the same connotations, in our slang "(big) wheel"; we wonder if this is only a coincidence. Try that expression in verse 2!

TRUMPET (vs. 20: Shofar): scratch, scrape, rub, polish. This leads to the idea of brightness, brilliance, and a brilliant tone. The word for "scribe" (Sepher) is akin to it (cf. Word Studies on Ezra 7: note the resemblance in primary meaning). There seems to be a connection between what a person communicates by writing or speech, and what he conveys by musical tones.

SUMMARY

This chapter tells of the effort of Israel's enemies to block progress on the wall by ridicule and rumor. First, Sanballat of Samaria made fun of these feeble people trying by themselves to push stones around; stones which already had been pushed over and burned, showing their ineffectiveness. Tobiah joined in by saying it wouldn't support a fox. Nehemiah prayed, and the people kept on working till the wall was half built.

Then their enemies came from four directions and threatened to do battle. Again Nehemiah prayed, and this time he set a guard. The workers were becoming tired and discouraged. A rumor of ambush spread, and as the people became frightened, Nehemiah calmed them and encouraged them to be willing to fight for God and home. Half of the workers were put on guard while the other half worked; even these had their weapons in their hand or within reach. At the sound of a trumpet, all were to rush to that point to defend their fellows. They worked from dawn to dusk, they remained close to their work instead of going home, some slept in their clothes, and they stayed alert.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. When did these events happen, compared to the previous chapter?
2. What methods were used by Israel's enemies to prevent building?
3. What tribes of people opposed them?
4. What is the first thing Nehemiah did to overcome them? The second thing?