

Nehemiah 4:1-23

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Date: 08 November 2020

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[0 : 00] So, turning your Bibles to Nehemiah 4. And if you're joining us, we've been kind of going through Nehemiah chapter chunk at a time.

And so I suppose the summary of chapter 4 is verse 6. Nehemiah chapter 4 and 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.

So we built the wall. Someone asked me this week about the decision that we had made about this Sunday, that had we made the decision because I was suffering from a midlife crisis.

And you get asked all sorts of things when you make a decision like we've made. It's a very good question, isn't it, really? Because middle age is a pretty dangerous time.

Middle age spread is something that can affect the soul as well as the body. And it's true not only for us and for ourselves personally, but for the work that we're involved in.

[1 : 10] The halfway stage is always the hardest, isn't it? It's the most difficult time when you're in a race. The halfway point is the toughest. Climbing a mountain, it's the halfway bit. You set off with great enthusiasm, and then you get to the halfway stage.

And that's the time when you're most likely to go back. And so here in verse 6 of Nehemiah 4, the entire wall has been joined together up to half its height.

In other words, they've reached halfway. The job's half done. And that is the moment, significantly, when the enemy chooses to escalate the opposition, the attack.

And so in verses 7 and 8, we're told of this conspiracy of opposition. And it seems to encompass the city of Jerusalem. They're surrounded on all sides by enemies, and then it begins to move in. There are times in our lives when it's like that. There are times in the life of the church when it's like that, when the enemy seems to close in around us. And you can feel, is it time to pull back?

[2 : 18] Or is it time to keep going? And it may be that the church in this country is facing such a time. It feels sometimes a little bit like where the grand old Duke of York, with his 10,000 men, they were only halfway up, and they were neither up nor down.

And it feels in some ways as if the Christian church is a little bit like that in the UK at the moment. There's an awfully long way to go for us spiritually, isn't there? It's an awfully long way for you and I to go spiritually in our own Christian lives.

And perhaps you're wondering tonight, will I ever get there? Will I ever make it? The work is only half done in my life. And we wonder, will it ever be done? And the devil comes, and before we know it, we've downed tools, spiritually speaking.

And maybe you're under that temptation tonight. You're ready to give up. You're ready to go back. Maybe that the Christian life hasn't turned out like you expected it to be.

Maybe Christian faith and ministry has taken far more out of you than you ever thought it would. Nobody told you that it would be as hard. Nobody told you it would be as costly.

[3 : 22] To be a Christian. And now you've found out otherwise. And you've lost that initial zeal and enthusiasm for the things of Christ. And you're half or you're middle-aged spiritually.

And you're finding it tough, very difficult. Well, think of God's work in the world. That the gospel would be preached to all nations.

His kingdom should be preached amongst the nations. And there's been amazing progress, isn't there, over the last 250 years. Terrific progress. And yet there are still thousands of dialects and languages that don't have the Bible.

Cultures where there's no gospel witness. There's so much work to be done. And you begin to wonder, will it ever get done? The devil is on your back.

Well, come nearer to home. Come to IPC. And we've got lots to be thankful for in this church, haven't we? God has been good to us. But we haven't really begun to touch Ealing.

[4 : 24] In West London. If the people came from across the road. One half of the road. The building would be packed. One road in London.

And you've got a full church. We'd be packed to capacity. And many people in church life. Around the country are finding that the work is hard.

And the opposition is severe. And it may be that some of you have been around a while. And you're tired. And you're not tired of the work. But you're tired in the work.

And it's easy to get bogged down. It's easy to get tired and become discouraged. And it's easy to begin suddenly feeling overwhelmed. By the sheer size of the task. I got information this week about a national mission.

That they're planning. And I groaned as I got it. Because you feel sometimes suddenly that often too much is being asked of you. And that can be demoralizing and desolating.

[5 : 24] Experience. Sometimes the work can be very unattractive. Look at verse 10. The strength of the people is failing. And here's the work. There's too much rubble. Too much rubble. And by ourselves we will not be able to rebuild the wall.

There's rubble everywhere. And we're working hard. Day and night that verse is saying. And there's nothing to show for it for what we've been doing. And we don't seem to be making progress. Now how do you cope with that?

How do you get through a midlife crisis spiritually? Well I think this chapter really helps us. Number one it tells us about the attack of the enemy. And number two it tells us about the counter attack of the people of God.

First of all the attack of the enemy. And so we see this magnificent statement don't we?

We built the wall. We built the wall in verse 6. And after all that he describes what we'll look at.

[6 : 22] The attack of the enemy. And so what we find in chapter 4. We find wherever that God is significantly at work. Like he is in Nehemiah 4. There will inevitably be opposition.

And it's basically two pronged. In the earlier part of the chapter. There's first of all a campaign of talk and sarcasm. And taunts and jeers. But as the work progresses.

It moves from that to all out threats. In the second half of the chapter. And there's this kind of conspiracy. To bring this work to a standstill. So the smear campaign.

First of all it's the easiest thing in the world isn't it to oppose something. It's the easiest thing to ridicule it. And that's what's happening at the beginning of chapter 4. We're told that when Sanballat heard that they were rebuilding the wall.

Verse 1. And he is furious. And he's very indignant. And he mocked the Jews. And he said before. His fellows and the army of Samaria. He said what are these feeble Jews doing?

[7 : 25] Verse 2. What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore it themselves? What a joke. Will they sacrifice? Will they finish it in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish?

And burned ones at that? And then Tobiah chips in doesn't he? In verse 3. The Ammonite was beside him. And he said well yes what are they building? Look if a fox goes up on this wall.

He'll break down their stone wall. And I think don't underestimate that kind of talk. Do you remember what it was like in the school playground when you were a kid? Isn't it?

When you're the butt of that kind of joke. Talk is very powerful. It can be very damaging. It's not true is it? That sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.

That's not true at all. Sarcastic words and words of ridicule. Think of people I was in university with. People I trained with.

[8 : 24] They lost their faith because of words. Because of derisory words. They went to colleges in the lecture hall. Or they read commentaries in the Bible where the truth of God was mocked.

And today they're nowhere. We live in a culture don't we? Where there's lots of this mockery in the media. And the media has got enormous respect doesn't it?

For the world religions. But simple faith in the God of the Bible. Jesus loves me. This I know. For the Bible tells me so. Well that is ridicule doesn't it?

And that's the kind of thing going on here. What are these feeble Jews doing? Are they going to fortify themselves? Are they going to do all this by themselves? Is God going to help you? And that's what they mean don't they?

With reference to this sacrifice. They probably did sacrifices before the building began to worship God. Are you going to do it by prayer? Do you really think? You go home to your prayer meeting. [9 : 24] They're mocking the people of God. They're ridiculing them. It's so subtle isn't it? So modern. I faced it. You faced it. That when a Christian stands up and dares to say.

That the only hope for this world is. Jesus Christ. And the gospel of the Lord Jesus. When a Christian dares to say. That actually what needs to happen to you and me.

Is that you and I need to be born again. So simple. So simple minded. So naive.

So much more complicated than that. Do you really think the prayer will do it? Same kind of approach in this chapter. The devil doesn't have any new tricks.

There's mockery and ridicule and sarcasm. What do we do with that? Well the answer is there in verse 6. You ignore it. So we built the wall. Said Nehemiah.

[10 : 21] Wasn't the slightest bit. Affected by the superior talk. So we built the wall he says. Do you remember how the apostle Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians?

And at the end of the first chapter. He says in verse 26 and 27. Consider your calling brothers and sisters. Think about who you are. Not many of you are wise.

According to worldly standards. Not many of you are powerful. Not many of you are noble. But you're a pretty feeble bunch. Are you going to overturn the world?

Are you going to make a mark on society? Not many of you have got much clout. There's not many wise. And not many noble. But wonderfully God chose. What is foolish in the world.

Shame the wise. God chose what is weak. In the world. Shame the strong. And God chose what is low. And despised. And even the things that are not.

[11 : 17] To bring about. To bring to nothing things that are. And that's exemplified isn't it? In the life of the apostle Paul. When he came to Corinth. Do you remember what they said about him?

In 2 Corinthians 10. They were saying this. This guy Paul. He writes impressively. His letters are weighty and powerful. But then you meet him. And when you meet him.

His presence is weak. And his speech is contemptible. And he's not a charismatic personality. Is this the man that will change Corinth? I'm not very impressed by him.

You look at him. He's a feeble sort of fellow isn't he? And yet you notice what Paul says. He says the weapons of our warfare. How we fight as Christians.

Are not of the flesh. We're not about jihad. But divine power to destroy strongholds. And so the apostle Paul was the man. That God used wasn't he.

[12 : 15] To pull down the devil's strongholds in Corinth. It wasn't done by an act of parliament. It wasn't done by some moral campaign. It wasn't done. It was done by a preacher of the gospel. And I'm not very impressed with one of that.

He pulls down Satan's strongholds in Corinth. So don't be deflected. And don't be put off by the campaign of talk. That goes on down to the very day.

But notice. When the talking campaign fails. When the mocking campaign fails. And the people of God stay strong. What happens? What will happen? It's very clear what will happen.

Verse 7 and 8. There's a threat. And it's a widening conspiracy of opposition. And so we rebuilt the wall. Despite the taunts and the allegations.

We built the wall. We made good progress. Till all of it reached half its height. For the people who worked with all their heart. Now verse 7. When Sambalat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites. And the people of Ashdod.

[13 : 18] Heard that the repairs to Jerusalem's walls were going ahead. And that the gaps were being closed. They were very angry. And they plotted together. To come and fight against Jerusalem.

And stir up trouble against us. And so if the church endures the mockery. And the campaign of talk. And the church remains standing.

And preaching Jesus Christ. What comes next? Threats come. And the greater and wider. The opposition becomes. So it's not just Sambalat. And Tobiah.

The Arabs. The Ammonites. The Ashdodites. And the Philistines. So. You read that group. And if you know anything about the Bible's history. You'll think. What are they all doing together? Because naturally they were enemies.

But. They sink their differences to join forces. To close ranks. To oppose the building of the wall. And the people of God. And it's really a circle of opposition.

[14:17] And Jerusalem is entirely encircled by enemies. And what is more. They are closing in. That is the rumor. Isn't it? That's passed around in verse 11 and 12. It's always been like this. People will always conspire.

To oppose the work of God. Psalmist saw it in his day. Didn't he? Psalm 2. Why did the nations rage? Why? Why do the kings. Of the earth. Take counsel together. Against the Lord. And his anointed one. It's happening then. You see it in the gospels. Don't you? So whenever. God is doing something significant.

And there's. There's nothing more significant. Is there. Than what he did at Calvary. At the cross. And at the cross. What do you find? You find. That really interesting phrase. That Pilate and Herod. Herod became firm friends that day.

The Pharisees. And the Herodians. They. They joined forces. Because the more that God is at work. The more that kind of thing. Is going to happen. And the more that God is at work.

[15:18] Through his church. In society. The greater. And the wider. Will be the opposition. And so you will find. People who don't agree on anything else. Will join forces. To oppose the work of God.

People who wouldn't have anything. In common normally. Who wouldn't give the time of day. To one another. Will join in forces. To stop the work. And what we need to remind ourselves.

Is this. Is that. This kind of opposition. Is a sure sign. That God is at work. And so when you see it that way. And when people are so desperate.

To stop the work. Of God. It is because the work of God. Is succeeding. And they feel threatened by it. It looked according to verse one.

As if these people. Are going at it. Hammer and tong. They are going at the work. Aren't they? And so according to Sambalot. That is what made him so furious.

[16:18] And so angry. These feeble Jews. Were. Going at the work. So hard. It was as if they were going to complete the work. In one day. They were so zealous. So enthusiastic. About what they are doing. And in verse seven.

We read about how much progress. They have made. And that they were actually. Filling up the gaps. And the whole wall. Was built all the way around. Up to half its height. Things were happening. And. They were furious about it.

You see this. The devil does not bother. With half-hearted Christians. And the devil could not care less. About half-hearted churches.

But if you are serious. About your Christianity. And if you are in earnest. About Christianity. Well then all hell will oppose you. And I don't want to labor a point.

But I do want to say. There is an attitude about. That basically says. If you live right. Nothing can go wrong. And that is sure superficial nonsense. And there is an attitude about today.

[17:15] That. That. As long as churches. Kind of do their work. Then. Then all the world will look at them. And think. Oh aren't they doing a great job. And that is so not true. Because there will be opposition.

When God is at work. And the more God is at work. The more opposition there will be. And the more significant a work. That God is doing. The greater and the wider. Will the opposition be. And it is only dangerous.

It is only dangerous. When you allow yourself. To be influenced by it. So look at verses 10 to 12. Meanwhile the people in Judah said. What a kick in the stomach. For Nehemiah.

Do you remember Judah. There have been so many prophecies. About Judah. Judah. Let me remind you. Of one great promise. That Judah had. The people of Judah. Your brothers will praise you. Your hand will be on the neck.

Of your enemies. Your father's sons. Will bow down to you. You are a lion's cub Judah. You return from the prey my son. Like a lion. He crouches and lies down. Like a lioness.

[18:11] Who dares to rouse him. And here is the promise. That you know. The scepter will not depart from Judah. Nor the ruler's staff. From between his feet. Until he to whom it belongs. Shall come.

And the obedience of the nation. Shall be his. And so Judah. Was supposed to be. Of all the tribes of Israel. The most spiritual of people. And yet they have been infected. By the opposition.

And its toll is taken upon them. And then in Judah. It was said. The strength of those. Who bear the burden. Is failing. There's too much trouble.

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. How do you know that Judah? How do you know? Some of the surrounding people.

Came to them. And they kept telling them. They told them ten times. The passage says. That time the Jews. From all directions. Came. And said to us ten times. You must return to us.

[19 : 09] Give up. Give up. Give up. It's too hard. So disheartening. Judah of all people. They should have known better. When those who should have been.

In the thick of it. According to that prophecy. Are ready to give in. Why does it happen? How does it happen? It's there in verse 12.

The Jews who live near the enemy. Told us this. You can't live in a monastery. I'm not arguing for that. I'm not arguing that you isolate yourself. From the world. Not at all.

But you don't have to listen. To the propoganda of the world. And you certainly don't have to. Bring it to the church. And that's what's happening here. The Jews pick up the gossip.

From the world. That Sambalat has leaked out to them. To hear. You do this. You're in massive trouble. And they bring it into the city. And it's the talk of the war. Ten times. They were telling us. It's no use.

[20 : 06] We're surrounded. We don't stand a chance. It's negativism. It's negativism. And negativism is rife.

In conservative evangelical churches today. It's the devil's work. So when you listen to the world. More than you listen.

To God. When you're nearer the world. Than you are nearer the church. When you're more influenced. By what you read on Facebook. And what you read on the BBC. Than what you are by the Bible.

That kind of negative talk. Is poison. And it causes so much harm. And I'm thankful. We've been preserved from that here. But we need to be very careful.

At the danger of negative talk. What do you think. If Jesus had listened to Peter. None of us would have been here tonight. Get behind me. Satan.

[21 : 04] Said Jesus to Peter. You're not listening to God. You're not in tune with God. This isn't God's word. It's the propoganda of the evil one. Get behind me.

Satan. It's a real danger. And so many Christians. Are living dangerously near the enemy. No close contact with God's word.

No intimate fellowship with Jesus Christ. And no heart communion with God's people. No. And what the result of that is. Is negativism.

And discouragement. It's too big. The days are too evil. Keep your head down. No. Nobody ever comes to. A church service neutral.

Nobody. Has a neutral effect. On a meeting like this. And if you live too close to the enemy. You'll have no appetite. For God's work. No desire for his truth.

[22 : 02] And nothing but discouragement for God's people. Now let me try and. Point you to the counter attack of God's people. Alright. How do you keep living the Christian life.

In the middle of. Such opposition. How do you keep the enemy at bay. So that the church can make progress. In gospel. There's three things. They're really simple things. Three things. Verse six.

They had a mind to work. Verse nine. Is it? They have a heart to pray. And verse nine.

They have an eye to watch. Three things. How does the work of God go forward? A mind to work. A heart to pray. An eye to watch. Let's just go through that. A mind to work.

Verse six. God's people in those days. They don't mope. Over the difficulties. They don't waste their energies. They don't feel sorry for themselves. They do not retaliate. They just get on with the work. Why? Because they had a mind to work.

[23 : 03] Apostle Paul says. Let the mind. Be in you. Let this mind be in you. Which also is in Christ Jesus. Who though he was equal. With God. Did not consider equality with God.

Something to be grasped. But he humbled himself. Taking the form of a servant. Being born in the likeness of a man. Being found in human form. He humbled himself. Being obedient to death. You see. Jesus Christ didn't stand on his dignity.

Jesus Christ didn't claim his rights. He didn't insist on doing his own will. We thank God. Don't we? That Jesus had a mind to do God's work.

And God's will. He set his face like a flint towards Jerusalem. He was so determined to do the work. That God had given him to do. To save his people.

By dying on the cross. So determined was he. That he would do the work. Which God had given him to do. He was so determined. It frightened the people around him at times.

[24 : 01] They saw it in his eyes. They saw it in his face. As he went towards Jerusalem. Because he had a mind to work. Let this mind be in you. Says Paul. So don't sit around licking your wounds.

Feeling sorry for yourselves. When the world starts calling you names. What do we expect? A mind to work. A heart to pray. And those things go together. Verse 9. He says after this kind of renewed attack.

Nevertheless we made our prayer to our God. Have you noticed that? In your own life. The two things go together. Don't they? A mind to work. And a heart to pray. And so when prayer is work. Prayer is squeezed out. The work comes to a standstill. That's not only true in your life. But it's true in the life of the church. We learn from Jesus in the gospel.

The pattern of his prayer life. That whenever there's a crucial moment. Whenever there's a turning point in our Lord's earthly ministry. He gave himself to prayer again and again. And we find that at every crucial moment.

[25 : 05] On his path to Calvary. Every time. We find that in the early church. In Acts 4. When Peter and John are released from prison.

Do you remember they're threatened with their lives. And they go off to the Mediterranean for a few days break to recover. They didn't. They went to the prayer meeting. They went to Jerusalem. It says when they were released.

They went to their friends. And reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. And when they heard it. They lifted their voices together. To God and said. Sovereign Lord who made heaven and earth and sea. And everything in them.

And now Lord look upon their threats. Grant your servants boldness. To continue to speak your word with boldness. And so when the world was threatening them.

What did they do? They looked to God. They prayed to God. And they came together with other Christians of one accord. And they prayed that God would enable them to carry on doing. What we've been doing before. So they built the wall.

[26 : 04] And you can only do that through prayer. I'm not a prophet. But I can tell you that the work will not go on. Unless there is united prayer. We will not have a mind to work.

And it's what Nehemiah did isn't it? After that first round of sarcasm and ridicule. In the opening verses. The first thing he does is look up. He doesn't do what would come naturally to me. Which would be to retaliate.

To lash out. He looks up and he says. Hear oh Lord we are despised. He prays in a way that you and I. May not even dare to pray. An imprecatory prayer.

But the point of this. Is he didn't do what many of us would do. Under this kind of pressure. He didn't lash out. He looked up. And you notice he encourages the people. Just look at verse 14.

He says to the people and the nobles. Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord who is great and awesome. In verse 20. He said to the nobles and the rest of the people.

[27 : 07] The work is great and widely spread. And we are separated on the wall from one another. In the place where you hear the sound of the trumpet. Rally to us there. Our God will fight for us. The home says fear him you saints.

And you will then have nothing else to fear. Make you his service. Your delight. Your wants shall be his care. And so when the work is hard.

And the opposition is mounting. What do you do? You look up. And then lastly an eye to watch. Look at verse 9. It's in verse 9.

They set a guard as a protection against them day and night. He's a remarkable organizer. He knew how to make the people watchful of one another. As well as their own interests.

Didn't Jesus say to his disciples. Watch and pray. That's how the wall is built. That's how the work goes on. Even though all hell is let loose against it.

[28 : 07] Let me read to you. As I finish. If I can find the book. Let me read to you of an illustration of Nehemiah.

A man called George Whitefield. Few Christians have encountered fiercer or more sustained opposition than the 18th century evangelist George Whitefield.

Whitefield. Whitefield rather than John Wesley or any other 18th century leader was the central figure in the great evangelical awakening in Britain and America. As a young Anglican clergyman he often preached to crowds of over 50,000 people.

That's right. 50,000 people in the open air without microphones or loudspeakers. Benjamin Franklin who eventually became his American publisher doubted that that feat was possible. He attended a meeting to assess the matter as accurately as he could.

And he concluded that it was indeed possible due to Whitefield's extraordinary vocal powers. His clear enunciation. And the total silence that often prevailed while he preached.

[29 : 10] His hearers were not only spellbound but often brought under such conviction of sin that whole multitudes would weep. And it was by Whitefield that an initially fearful John Wesley was introduced to open air preaching.

Opposition came early principally from godless ministers of the gospel. Most Anglican churches were eventually closed to him. Three principles seemed to guide him in dealing with it. Never to reply to his critics.

Wherever possible to avoid engaging in controversy. And never to stop proclaiming the whole truths of the gospel. When churches closed their door to him he preached to much larger crowds out of doors.

He would courteously request permission to use the local church wherever he was. Preaching in the church if permission was given. But rejoicing in the greater opportunity when it was not. He had an ultimate goal.

To proclaim the gospel fully and fearlessly. That goal was to Whitefield what building the wall was to Nehemiah. The slander and abuse to which he was subjected never made him lose sight of it.

[30 : 10] He never stopped building his wall. He preached his last sermon as a dying man from the landing of a Presbyterian manse in Massachusetts. The power of the Holy Spirit gripped his listeners while the candle in his candle holder slowly burned and went out in its socket.

He died the following day. His own life burned out in completing the task God had given him. And when you are opposed remember the examples of Whitefield and Nehemiah.

You have been called to a work. Your business is to get on with it with all the strength at your disposal. And not let yourself be sidetracked. So we built the work.

A heart to work. A will to pray. An eye to watch. Let's pray.