

“DEEP WATERS” – A Men’s Leadership Study in Nehemiah
Lesson Four: Opposition Arrives
Nehemiah 4:1–23

Opening Question: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me.” How were you ever affected by that little taunt? Recall a time when name-calling impacted your life.

We can divide this chapter into three sections: Nehemiah 4:1–6 – Discouragement through Ridicule; Nehemiah 4:7–15 – Thwarting a Conspiracy; Nehemiah 4:16–23 – A Strategy that Worked.

Nehemiah 4:1–6 – Discouragement through Ridicule

Verse 1 – What were the possible reasons why Sanballat should get so angry?

- a. For Sanballat the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem meant that the power of Samaria would be diminished because Nehemiah had come as the leader of the people – who up to this time had had no real leader as such.
- b. For Geshem there was the fear that Jerusalem would usurp some of his business clientele.

How do people who are threatened respond to the threat?

Gene Getz says that they respond in one of three ways:

- a. They are extremely fearful and retreat, you never hear from them again
- b. They become very angry and aggressive
- c. They blend both fear and anger, and then attack, directly or indirectly (this would be Sanballat’s response)

Verses 1–3 – How did Sanballat and his followers attempt to intimidate Nehemiah and the workers?

- a. He paraded his army before the laboring Jews; the army was probably a small private army of his body-guards, but the sight of armed men could be intimidating
- b. He enlisted the support of Tobiah, the Ammonite official – always good to get others on your side; the more involved, especially with important positions, the more intimidation occurs

“name-dropping” can be very intimidating; don’t even have to have those people present; just the fact of mentioning their name
- c. He offered a series of rhetorical questions – one can almost hear his tone of voice
 1. “Will they offer sacrifices?” – Are they going to pray this wall up? Well, that is their only hope!

2. "Will they finish in a day?" – Have they any idea what they are tackling?
3. "Can they bring stones back to life – burned as they are?" – This will never work

What is interesting is the psychological warfare going on in this series of questions:

- a. Was Sanballat trying to intimidate the Jews through this ridicule, or
- b. Was he trying to convince himself that the work would never be completed

In other words, was Sanballat trying to overcome his own insecurity with these questions?

Verses 4–5 – Nehemiah's prayer of response

1. Notice the thrust of this prayer – hurled at God; it was God's work that was being ridiculed
2. Nehemiah looks to God to vindicate His own work

This is a tough prayer for us today – we call this an imprecatory prayer
Are we to pray that God would rain down curses upon our enemies? No
Are we to pray that bad things would happen to our enemies? No

Then why this prayer? We have to remember that Nehemiah, as he looks at Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem and the others and hears their threats of ridicule, understands that they are God's enemies as much as they are his; therefore he is entreating God to act for Himself.

Verse 6 – The rebuilding continues; the ridicules are ignored

The continued progress on the walls makes the opposition look rather small
Sanballat and company were overshadowed by the faith, unity, and determination of those they thought were weaker

Prayer + Persistence = Success

The people had a heart to work because they witnessed that zeal in Nehemiah.

President Eisenhower said, In order to be a leader, a man must have followers. And to have followers, a man must have their confidence. Hence, the supreme quality for a leader is unquestioned integrity. Without it, no real success is possible, no matter whether it is on a section gang, a football field, in an army or in an office. If a man's associates find him guilty of phoniness, if they find that he lacks forthright integrity, he will fail. His teachings and actions must square with each other. The first great need, therefore, is integrity and high purpose. (Getz, p. 72)

Nehemiah 4:7–15 – Thwarting a Conspiracy

Verse 7 – Still more anger and the crowds are getting bigger – now Jerusalem has problems on its western border – the men of Ashdod.

Verse 8 – Enemies draw up a battle plan

Question: Why did they not strike the Jews building the walls? Certainly they outnumbered the

Jews there.

Could it have been the letters from the King (Nehemiah 2:9)

Nevertheless the threat had to be taken seriously.

Verse 9 – The Jews’ response – “we prayed and posted a guard”

Notice, the people rallied around prayer; before it was Nehemiah who initiated the prayer; now

it is the people who are doing so; they have been learning from their leader

Here was the plan – does it sound familiar?

Commitment to God – through prayer

Commitment to common sense – posted a guard

This continues Nehemiah’s habit:

Nehemiah 2:4–5

Nehemiah 4:4–6

Nehemiah 4:14

Illustration: On one of D.L. Moody’s trips across the Atlantic, a fire broke out in the hold of the ship. Moody and a friend joined the crew and other volunteers passing buckets of water to be thrown on the fire. The friend said to Moody, “Mr. Moody, let us go to the other end of the ship and pray.” The common-sense evangelist replied, “No sir; we stand right here and pass buckets and pray hard all the time!” (Campbell, p. 39)

Verse 10 – The people are beginning to get weary – the work is half-done; the threat of attack lingers

over them; the momentum is gone; the excitement of 18 has waned. Perhaps they had started to believe the ridicule that Sanballat and Tobiah had tossed their way.

Lesson: It is always more difficult to complete a project than it is to begin one.

This is true in our family lives, in our careers, as well as in our church lives.

How have you learned to persevere until the very end?

Verse 11 – Now comes another threat of infiltration by the enemy; terrorism

Verse 12 – Fear of terror now grips the people.

For terrorism to be successful, all it has to do is to instill fear; it really does not have to do anything else.

Verses 13–14 – Nehemiah’s plan – a work stoppage and preparedness for a terror attack; notice how he arranges the people according to family groupings

“Remember the Lord” – here was a call to remember the past; those times when situations looked very bleak, yet God acted on their behalf – time of Hezekiah; time of Jehoshaphat; time of the exodus from Egypt

It is like Nehemiah is reminding the people that this is no more difficult for God than those were.

Nehemiah 4:15–23 – A Strategy that Worked

Nehemiah prepared his people but he also knew that the battle was the Lord’s (verse 20)

Psalm 127:1–2 – Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain.

Verse 23 – Nehemiah set the example as a good leader should

Josephus writes in his Antiquities of the Jews, 11.5.8 – “Nehemiah himself made the rounds of the city by night, never tiring either through work or lack of food and sleep, neither of which he took for pleasure but as a necessity.”

The key to this section is that Nehemiah encouraged the people to stand guard and look out for one another. Is this not what the church is supposed to be about? We are to look out for one another. We are not islands – we are a body. We are not merely individuals – we are a family. This is the purpose for our Prayer Triads. To get us to pray for at least two other men within the body here at Buffalo Covenant Church. To know that when difficulties arise, I can turn to Jim and Dick (Tuesday am) or Brian and Adam (Thursday pm).

Assignment #4:

1. What gives you the greatest difficulty: external criticism or internal fears? Why? How can

you combat that difficulty?

2. What do you tend to do most easily “with all your heart?”: worship? Work? Worry?

Complain–have a critical spirit? Be honest.

3. As you read through Nehemiah 4 at least twice this week, what one truth is God particularly

addressing in your own life? What do you intend to do about it?

4. How can you keep from burning out, preventing you from seeing a project through to completion?