

**Nehemiah 4**  
**October 24, 2021**

**Open with Prayer**

**HOOK:**

Q: When you think about how the Enemy operates, what are some of the tactics he likes to use loves to undermine our work and ministries? [Let people engage]

**Transition:** Satan has all kinds of tactics to undermine the believer or communities of believers. He likes to mock us, or discourage us, or create self-doubts about what God is asking us to do, and the list goes on! In today's text, I see at least four tactics that the Enemy attempted to use to get the Jewish people to stop their work on the wall.

**BOOK:**

**Opposition to the Rebuilding**

**4** When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews, <sup>2</sup> and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said, “What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble—burned as they are?”

<sup>3</sup> Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, “What they are building—if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones!”

<sup>4</sup> Hear us, O our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. <sup>5</sup> Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders.

<sup>6</sup> So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart.

<sup>7</sup> But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the men of Ashdod heard that the repairs to Jerusalem's walls had gone ahead and that the gaps were being closed, they were very angry. <sup>8</sup> They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. <sup>9</sup> But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.

<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, “The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall.”

<sup>11</sup> Also our enemies said, “Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work.”

<sup>12</sup> Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, “Wherever you turn, they will attack us.”

<sup>13</sup> Therefore I stationed some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families, with their swords, spears and bows. <sup>14</sup> After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, “Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes.”

<sup>15</sup> When our enemies heard that we were aware of their plot and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to his own work.

<sup>16</sup> From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armor. The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah <sup>17</sup> who were building the wall. Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other, <sup>18</sup> and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked. But the man who sounded the trumpet stayed with me.

<sup>19</sup> Then I said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, “The work is extensive and spread out, and we are widely separated from each other along the wall. <sup>20</sup> Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!”

<sup>21</sup> So we continued the work with half the men holding spears, from the first light of dawn till the stars came out. <sup>22</sup> At that time I also said to the people, “Have every man and his helper stay inside Jerusalem at night, so they can serve us as guards by night and workmen by day.” <sup>23</sup> Neither I nor my brothers nor my men nor the guards with me took off our clothes; each had his weapon, even when he went for water.

### **Process Observations/Questions:**

Q: What did you most like about this passage? What resonated with you? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you least like about this passage? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you find in this passage that you didn't understand? [Let people engage]

Q: What do we learn about Jesus in this passage? [Let people engage]

### **LOOK:**

Did you identify with any of the tactics the Enemy used to stop God's work? He used *ridicule* (4:1–6) and *plots of war* (vv. 7–9), which resulted in difficulties *within* the Jewish ranks: *discouragement* (v. 10), *fear* (vv. 11–23).

Referring to Satan, Paul wrote, “For we are not ignorant of his devices” (2 Cor. 2:11). This chapter presents four of Satan's devices for opposing the Lord's work, and it also tells us how God's people can be steadfast and defeat the enemy. If you start building, you will soon be battling; so, be prepared!

### **Close in Prayer**

### **Commentaries for Today's Lesson:**

**Wiersbe, W. W. (1993). Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the Old Testament (Ne 4:1-23). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.**

#### **I. Ridicule (4:1–6)**

God's people always have enemies. In this case, they were Sanballat, a government official in Samaria; Tobiah, the Ammonite; and Geshem, an Arabian, who is also called Gashmu (6:1, 6). These three wicked men were outside the nation of Israel; in fact, the Ammonites were definite enemies of the Jews (Deut. 23:3–4). Their first weapon was ridicule; they mocked the "feeble Jews" openly before the leaders of Samaria. Satan is a mocker (Luke 22:63; 23:35–37). Ridicule is a device used by ignorant people who are filled with jealousy. They mocked the people ("feeble Jews"), the plan ("will they finish in a day?"), and the materials ("stones and rubbish"). How did Nehemiah answer them? He prayed to his God! His concern was only for the glory of God and the testimony of the nation, so do not read personal revenge into his prayer (see Ps. 139:19–24). Note that the people still worked as they prayed, for prayer is no substitute for work. Satan would have loved to see Nehemiah leave the wall and get involved in a dispute with Sanballat, but Nehemiah did not fall into Satan's trap. Never allow ridicule to stop your ministry; "take it to the Lord in prayer" and keep on working.

#### **II. Force (4:7–9)**

What Satan cannot accomplish by deceit he attempts to do by force. What a confederation of people we have in v. 7! And all of them conspired against the Jews. It is amazing how the devil seems to have no manpower shortage. We have two enemies in 2:10, three in 2:19, and a whole multitude in 4:7. But "if God be for us, who can be against us?" How did Nehemiah face this new attack? He prayed and set a watch. "Watch and pray!" is a repeated admonition in the NT; see Mark 13:33 (the world), Mark 14:38 (the flesh), and Eph. 6:18 (the devil). Note that Nehemiah did not depend on prayer alone; he also set a watch.

#### **III. Discouragement (4:10)**

The battle moves now from outside the city to inside. Satan followed this same tactic in Acts 5–6 when he used Ananias and Sapphira and the complaining widows inside the fellowship of the church. He also used Judas inside the ranks of the apostles. How discouraged the workers were, with all that rubbish on the inside of the city and the danger lurking on the outside. Why did the tribe of Judah complain? Perhaps it was because they were secretly in league with Sanballat (6:17). Note in 13:15 Judah's disobedience to the Law of God. When they said, "We are not able!" (v. 10), they were actually agreeing with the enemy (4:2). Discouragement and complaining spread rapidly and hinder God's work. We do not read that Nehemiah paid much attention to their complaint; he kept on building, watching, and praying.

#### **IV. Fear (4:11–23)**

Fear and faith can never abide in the same heart. In v. 11, we have a rumor the enemy started that their armies would suddenly invade Jerusalem. The Jews living outside the city heard this report and carried it to Nehemiah ten times. How persistent Satan's workers can be. Finally, Nehemiah

set the guard on the walls and encouraged the people not to fear. Note that the work stopped from v. 13 to v. 15—exactly what the enemy wanted. Nehemiah saw the folly of this plan, so he put the workers back on the job, a weapon in one hand and a tool in the other. He also set a special watch with trumpets (vv. 19–20), but he did not allow the work to stop. These Jews are wonderful examples of what a Christian worker ought to be: they had a mind to work (4:6), a heart to pray (4:9), an eye to watch (4:9), and an ear to hear (4:20).

**Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *Be Determined* (pp. 47-58). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.**

### *Workers and Warriors*

The Bible tells us to love our neighbors, and also to love our enemies; probably because they are generally the same people.”

Those words from Gilbert Keith Chesterton were certainly true in Nehemiah’s situation. His arrival in Jerusalem was a threat to Sanballat and his associates (2:10), who wanted to keep the Jews weak and dependent. A strong Jerusalem would endanger the balance of power in the region, and it would also rob Sanballat and his friends of influence and wealth.

When things are going well, get ready for trouble, because the enemy doesn’t want to see the work of the Lord make progress. As long as the people in Jerusalem were content with their sad lot, the enemy left them alone; but, when the Jews began to serve the Lord and bring glory to God’s name, the enemy became active.

Opposition is not only an evidence that God is blessing, but it is also an opportunity for us to grow. The difficulties that came to the work brought out the best in Nehemiah and his people. Satan wanted to use these problems as weapons to destroy the work, but God used them as tools to build His people. “God had one Son without sin,” said Charles Spurgeon, “but He never had a son without trial.”

When Sir James Thornhill was painting the inside of the cupola of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, at one point he finished an area and stepped back to view it. Had he gone back one step more, he would have fallen from the scaffolding and perhaps killed himself. Seeing the situation, a friend seized one of the brushes and rubbed paint over a part of the picture. The artist rushed forward to protect his work, and at the same time, his life was saved. When the picture of our life or ministry is not all we think it ought to be, perhaps the Master Artist is rescuing us from something far worse and preparing us for something far better.

Chapters 4 to 6 describe at least nine different tactics that the enemy used to try to stop the work on the walls. First, they attacked the Jewish people with *ridicule* (4:1–6) and *plots of war* (vv. 7–9). This resulted in difficulties *within* the Jewish ranks: *discouragement* (v. 10), *fear* (vv. 11–23), and *selfishness* (5:1–19). When attacks on the people failed to stop the work, the enemy then started to attack their leader, Nehemiah. They tried *compromise* (6:1–4), *slander* (vv. 5–9), *threats* (vv. 10–14) and *intrigue* (vv. 17–19); but none of these devices worked either. Nehemiah was “steadfast and unmovable” and led his people to finish the work in fifty-two days!

Referring to Satan, Paul wrote, “For we are not ignorant of his devices” (2 Cor. 2:11). This chapter presents four of Satan’s devices for opposing the Lord’s work, and it also tells us how God’s people can be steadfast and defeat the enemy. If you start building, you will soon be battling; so, be prepared!

## 1. Ridicule (Neh. 4:1–6)

British critic and author Thomas Carlyle called ridicule “the language of the devil.” Some people who can stand bravely when they are shot at will collapse when they are laughed at. Shakespeare called ridicule “paper bullets of the brain,” but those bullets have slain many a warrior.

It is not unusual for the enemy to insult the servants of God. Goliath ridiculed David when the shepherd boy met the giant with only a sling in his hand (1 Sam. 17:41–47). Jesus was mocked by the soldiers during His trial (Luke 22:63–65) and by the rabble while He was hanging on the cross (23:35–37); and some of the heroes of the faith had to endure mocking (Heb. 11:36). *When the enemy laughs at what God’s people are doing, it is usually a sign that God is going to bless His people in a wonderful way.* When the enemy rages on earth, God laughs in heaven (Ps. 2:4).

Sanballat and his friends had begun to ridicule the Jews even before the work on the wall had begun. “They laughed us to scorn,” wrote Nehemiah, “and despised us” (Neh. 2:19). What special relationship Sanballat had with the army of Samaria is not explained to us. Perhaps he had the army assembled as a show of strength to frighten the Jews. By making his initial speech before the army, Sanballat intensified the power of his ridicule as he made some important people laugh at the Jews.

First, Sanballat ridiculed *the workers* by calling them “feeble Jews” (4:2). The word *feeble* means “withered, miserable.” The people were like cut flowers that were fading away. They had no human resources that people could see, but the enemy could not see their great spiritual resources. The people of the world don’t understand that God delights in using feeble instruments to get His work accomplished (1 Cor. 1:18–31). The world glories in its wealth and power, but God’s people glory in their poverty and weakness. When we are weak, then we are strong (2 Cor. 12:1–10).

Then Sanballat ridiculed *the work itself* by asking three taunting questions. “Will they fortify themselves?” must have evoked gales of laughter from the Samaritan army. How could a remnant of feeble Jews hope to build a wall strong enough to protect the city from the army? “Will they sacrifice?” implies, “It will take more than prayer and worship to rebuild the city!” This question was blasphemy against Jehovah God, for Sanballat was denying that God would help His people. “Will they finish in a day?” suggests that the Jews didn’t know how difficult the task was and would soon call it quits.

In his final question, Sanballat ridiculed *the materials* they were using. The stones were taken out of the rubbish heaps and probably were so old and damaged that they would never last when set into the wall. While it is true that limestone is softened by fire, it is also true that the walls were “broken down,” while the gates were “consumed with fire” (Neh. 2:13). In spite of what Sanballat said, there was still plenty of good material for the builders to use.

Tobiah the Ammonite was one of the visiting dignitaries at the Samaritan army inspection; and when it was his turn to make a speech, he ridiculed *the finished product* (4:3). You wouldn’t need an army to knock down the wall; a solitary fox could do it! Of course, much that Sanballat and Tobiah said was true *from a human point of view*; for the Jewish remnant was weak and poor, and the work was too great for them. But they had great faith in a great God, and that’s what made the difference.

How did Nehemiah respond to this ridicule? *He prayed and asked God to fight the enemy for him.* This is the third time you find Nehemiah praying (1:4–11; 2:4), and it will not be the last time. Nehemiah didn’t allow himself to get detoured from his work by taking time to reply to

their words. The Lord had heard the sneering taunts of Sanballat and Tobiah, and He would deal with them in His own way and His own time.

Nehemiah's prayer resembles the "imprecatory psalms," such as Psalms 69; 79; and 139:19–22. We must remember that Nehemiah was praying as a servant of God concerned for the glory of God. He was not requesting personal vengeance but official vindication for God's people. The enemy had blasphemously provoked God before the builders, and this was a terrible sin. The opposition of Sanballat and Tobiah against the Jews was in reality opposition against God.

The things people say may *hurt* us, but they can never *harm* us, unless we let them get into our system and poison us. If we spend time pondering the enemy's words, we will give Satan a foothold from which he can launch another attack closer to home. The best thing to do is to pray and commit the whole thing to the Lord; and then *get back to your work!* Anything that keeps you from doing what God has called you to do will only help the enemy.

## **2. Intimidating plots (Neh. 4:7–9)**

A common enemy and a common cause brought four different groups together to stop the work on the walls of Jerusalem. The city was now completely surrounded by enemies! To the north were Sanballat and the Samaritans; to the east, Tobiah and the Ammonites; to the south, Geshem and the Arabs; and to the west, the Ashdodites. Ashdod was perhaps the most important city in Philistia at that time, and the Philistines did not want to see a strong community in Jerusalem.

God's people sometimes have difficulty working together, but the people of the world have no problem uniting in opposition to the work of the Lord (Ps. 2:1–2; Acts 4:23–30; Luke 23:12). As the enemy saw the work progressing, they became angry and decided to plan a secret attack against Jerusalem. Satan hates the Jews and has used one nation after another to try to destroy them (see Ps. 85 and Rev. 12). God chose the Jews to be His vehicle for giving the world the knowledge of the true God, the Scriptures, and the Savior (Rom. 9:1–5). "Salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22), and Satan wanted to prevent the Savior from coming into the world. If he could destroy the nation, he would frustrate God's plan.

Nehemiah suspected that his enemies would launch an attack, so he posted a guard and encouraged the people to pray. The workers held both tools and weapons (Neh. 4:17) and were prepared to fight when the signal was given. "Watch and pray" combines faith and works and is a good example for us to follow in our work and our warfare (see Mark 13:33; 14:38; Eph. 6:18; Col. 4:2–4).

The Christian's battle is not against flesh and blood, but against Satan and his demonic forces that use flesh and blood to oppose the Lord's work. If we hope to win the war and finish the work, we must use the spiritual equipment God has provided (Eph. 6:10–18; 2 Cor. 10:1–6). If we focus on the *visible* enemy alone and forget the *invisible* enemy, we are sure to start trusting our own resources; and this will lead to defeat.

## **3. Discouragement (Neh. 4:10)**

Pressures from without often create problems from within. It isn't easy to carry on your work when you are surrounded by danger and daily face the demands of a task that seems impossible. If the Jews became discouraged, they would defeat themselves; and Sanballat and his allies would never have to wage war.

Discouragement is a key weapon in Satan's arsenal. It was discouragement that kept Israel from entering the Promised Land at Kadesh-Barnea (Num. 13). "We be not able to go up against

the people; for they are stronger than we” (v. 31). The ten unbelieving spies “discouraged the heart of the children of Israel” (32:9); and as a result, the nation wandered in the wilderness forty years until the new generation was ready to conquer the land.

“We are not able!” is the rallying cry of all who take their eyes off the Lord and start looking at themselves and their problems. These discouraged Jewish workers were actually agreeing with the enemy who said they were feeble! (Neh. 2:19; 4:1–3) Sanballat had openly declared that the work would stop, and it almost did.

Why did this discouragement arise from the royal tribe of Judah? (See Gen. 49:8–12.) They had David’s blood in their veins, and you would think they would be men and women of great faith and courage. The answer is found in Nehemiah 6:17–19: Some people in the tribe of Judah were secretly cooperating with the enemy. The ties of marriage were stronger than the bonds of commitment to the Lord. According to 13:15–22, some of the leaders of Judah were not wholly devoted to the Lord, but they were more interested in making money. The combination of marriage and money divided their loyalties, and they became the cause of discouragement.

In over forty years of ministry, I have learned that, in the Lord’s work, *discouragers are often doubters and compromisers*. There is usually something wrong in their spiritual walk. They frequently lack faith in God’s Word, for one thing; and they are primarily interested in their own plans and pursuits. A double-minded person is unbelieving and unstable (James 1:5–8) and hinders the work of the Lord.

Nehemiah didn’t pay much attention to these complainers but went right on with the work. That’s the best thing to do. If you take time away from your work to listen to everybody who wants your attention, you will never get anything done. Nehemiah got his encouragement from prayer and the promises of God, and the occasional complaints of some of the people didn’t upset him.

#### **4. Fear (Neh. 4:11–23)**

The Jews who lived in the outlying villages (3:2, 5, 7, 13) kept bringing a report to the city that the enemy was planning another surprise attack. Whether these Jews were merely spreading rumors or helping to promote a conspiracy, we don’t know; but they told the story repeatedly. (“Ten times” is a Hebrew phrase meaning “many times.” See Gen. 31:41 and Num. 14:22.) Nehemiah didn’t respond immediately and probably was praying for God’s guidance. He himself was not afraid of the enemy; but when he saw that his people were starting to become afraid, he began to act.

In his First Inaugural Address, on March 4, 1933, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt said to a nation in the grip of an economic depression, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” He may have borrowed the thought from Henry David Thoreau, American naturalist, who wrote in his journal on September 7, 1851, “Nothing is so much to be feared as fear.” Why? Because fear paralyzes you, and fear is contagious and paralyzes others. Fear and faith cannot live together in the same heart. “Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?” (Matt. 8:26) Frightened people discourage others and help bring defeat (Deut. 20:8).

Nehemiah’s first step was to post guards at the most conspicuous and vulnerable places on the wall. The enemy could then see that the Jews were prepared to fight. He armed entire families, knowing that they would stand together and encourage one another. The Jews not only repaired the walls near their own houses (Neh. 3:28–30), but they stood with their families to protect their homes and their city.

After looking the situation over, Nehemiah then encouraged the people not to be afraid but to look to the Lord for help. If we fear the Lord, we need not fear the enemy. Nehemiah's heart was captivated by the "great and terrible" God of Israel (4:14; see 1:5), and he knew that God was strong enough to meet the challenge. He also reminded the people that they were fighting for their nation, their city, and their families. If the nation was destroyed, what would become of God's great promises to Israel and His plan of redemption?

When we face a situation that creates fear in our hearts, we must remind ourselves of the greatness of God. If we walk by sight and view God through the problems, we will fail, as did the Jews at Kadesh-Barnea (Num. 13:26–33). But if we look at the problem through the greatness of God, we will have confidence and succeed. That was the approach David took when he faced Goliath (1 Sam. 17:45–47).

When the enemy learned that Jerusalem was armed and ready, they backed off (Neh. 4:15). God had frustrated their plot. "The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; He makes the plans of the peoples of no effect. The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart to all generations" (Ps. 33:10–11, NKJV). It is good to remind ourselves that the will of God comes from the heart of God and that we need not be afraid.

Nehemiah knew that he couldn't interrupt the work every time he heard a new rumor, so he set up a defense plan that solved the problem: Half of the men worked on the wall while the other half stood guard. He saw to it that the people carrying materials also carried weapons and that the workers on the walls carried swords. In this way, the work would not be interrupted, and the workers would be ready in case of an alarm. The man with the trumpet stayed close to Nehemiah so the alarm could be given immediately. The people were prepared to fight (Neh. 4:14), but they realized that it was God who fought with them and He alone could give the victory.

When Charles Spurgeon started his church magazine in 1865, he borrowed the title from Nehemiah and called the publication *The Sword and Trowel*. He said it was "a record of combat with sin and labor for the Lord." It is not enough to build the wall; we must also be on guard lest the enemy take it from us. Building and battling are both a normal part of the Christian life if we are faithful disciples (Luke 14:28–33).

Again, Nehemiah spoke words of encouragement to the people (Neh. 4:19–20). He reminded them that they were involved in a great work. After all, they were serving a great God and rebuilding the walls of a great city. He also reminded them that they were not working alone, even though they couldn't see all of their fellow workers on the wall. God was with all of them and would come to their defense.

No matter what the workers were doing, or where they labored on the wall, they all kept an ear open for the sound of the trumpet. What an example for us to follow as we await the return of the Lord! "For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God" (1 Thes. 4:16).

Nehemiah also instituted a "second shift" and required the workers from the other towns to stay in Jerusalem at night and help guard the city. It is often while we sleep that the enemy does his most insidious work (Matt. 13:25), and we must be on guard.

Nehemiah not only organized the workers and guards and encouraged them to trust the Lord, but he also set the right kind of example before them (Neh. 4:23). He was a leader who served and a servant who led. He stayed on the job and was alert at all times. He inspected the city's defenses every night and made sure that the guards were on duty.



The late Dr. Alan Redpath explained why the Jews succeeded in getting their work done and keeping the enemy at bay: The people had a mind to work (v. 6), a heart to pray (v. 9), an eye to watch (v. 9), and an ear to hear (v. 20); and this gave them the victory (*Victorious Christian Service*, Revell, 1958; pp. 76–79).

They also had a godly leader with the faith to stand.

“Therefore ... be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58, NKJV).

**Getz, G. A. (1985). Nahum. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 1, pp. 681-683) Wheaton, IL: Victor Books**

#### 1. SANBALLAT’S PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE (4:1–3)

4:1–3. As noted earlier (2:10) **Sanballat** was displeased when he **heard** that Nehemiah had returned to Jerusalem to help the Jews. Sanballat, however, did not know of God’s interest in His people. Sanballat’s displeasure turned to intense anger (4:1; cf. v. 7). So, with **his associates**, including Tobiah (2:19; 4:3; also cf. v. 7; 6:1, 12, 14) and Geshem (2:19), and **in the presence of Samaritan soldiers**, Sanballat **ridiculed the Jews**. He accused them of rebelling against King Artaxerxes (2:19) and by a series of questions he suggested they were incapable of completing the project (4:2). Calling them **feeble** he asked if they would **offer sacrifices**. That is, could they possibly complete the walls so that they could then give sacrifices of thanksgiving? The question about finishing **in a day** suggests that the Jews did not know what they were undertaking. And how, Sanballat asked, could they use **burned**, weakened bricks from the **heaps of debris**? **Tobiah the Ammonite** (cf. 2:19), standing nearby, also tried to discourage the Jews. Ridiculing them, he said they were so inept in their work that **a fox**, weighing only a few pounds, **would break** it down by merely climbing **up on it**.

#### 2. NEHEMIAH’S SPIRITUAL RESPONSE (4:4–6)

4:4–5. Prayer was a distinct and consistent part of Nehemiah’s approach to problem-solving. When faced with Sanballat’s demoralizing attack, he immediately asked God for help: **Hear us, O our God, for we are despised**.

Like some of the imprecatory prayers in which the psalmists invoked God’s condemnation on His enemies, Nehemiah’s prayer in this instance was severe and condemning. He prayed that Sanballat and his cohorts would be taken captive and that they would be judged for **their sins**.

How should a Christian interpret this kind of praying, especially in view of what Jesus Christ said about praying for one’s enemies? (Matt. 5:44; cf. Rom. 12:14, 20) Several facts need to be noted. First, in opposing the Jews, Sanballat “and company” were actually opposing God. Second, God had already pronounced judgment on Israel’s enemies. Nehemiah was praying according to God’s will—that God would deliver Jerusalem from her enemies (Josh. 1:5). Third, Nehemiah was praying that God would bring about what He had promised Abraham regarding those who curse His people (Gen. 12:3). Fourth, vengeance belongs to God, not to Nehemiah or other believers (cf. Deut. 32:35; Rom. 12:19). Also see comments on the imprecatory psalms in the *Introduction* to the Book of Psalms.

4:6. After praying, Nehemiah and the Jews continued with the work. Some Christians pray and then wait for things to happen, but not Nehemiah! As in all his efforts, he blended the divine

perspective with the human. He faced Sanballat's opposition with *both* prayer and hard work. Once he committed the problem to the Lord, he trusted God to help them achieve their goal. And while praying and trusting, they **rebuilt the wall to half its height**. At this juncture their task was half completed. Sanballat and Tobiah's efforts at demoralizing the Jews failed. The Jews rose above their enemies' attempts at discouragement. Because **the people worked** so diligently and enthusiastically (**with all their heart**), they were able to complete half the job in a surprisingly short period of time. Nehemiah wrote later (6:15) that the entire task was completed in 52 days (about eight weeks of 6 days each), so possibly this halfway point took about four weeks.

### 3. SANBALLAT'S CONSPIRACY (4:7–12)

4:7–9. The Jewish workers' rapid progress naturally increased the threat to their enemies, who became **very angry** (cf. v. 1). So they decided to take more overt and corporate action. Joining **Sanballat** and the Samaritans from the north, **Tobiah** and **the Ammonites** from the east, Geshem (cf. 2:19) and **the Arabs** from the south, were **men** from **Ashdod**, a Philistine city, from the west. **They all plotted together to attack Jerusalem**, apparently from all sides.

The corporate strategy of Judah's enemies was met by a corporate response. Again, the people (**we**) **prayed** for help, and then added action to their prayers by posting **a guard** round the clock **to meet this threat**.

4:10–12. However, the problem was not automatically solved. In fact, the builders faced some new problems. They were physically and psychologically exhausted and the work seemed endless (v. 10). Furthermore, they faced the threat of a secret attack (v. 11) which Nehemiah knew was not idle talk (v. 12).

### 4. NEHEMIAH'S STRATEGY (4:13–15)

4:13–15. Nehemiah established a new strategy to meet the threat of enemy infiltration. He positioned **some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall with swords, spears, and bows**.

This must have been a difficult decision for Nehemiah. To place *whole families* together—including women and children—put tremendous pressure on fathers particularly. In case of outright attack, they would have no choice but to stay and fight for and with their family members. But Nehemiah knew it was the only decision he could make if they were to survive and succeed in rebuilding the walls.

Obviously fear gripped these people. So, Nehemiah gathered them together and charged them to face the situation courageously (**don't be afraid**) and to **remember the great and awesome Lord** (cf. 1:5) who was on their side, and to **fight** to save their families. **When their enemies heard that their plot** had been discovered, they did not attack, and the people resumed their construction **work**.

### 5. THE COMPLETION OF THE WALLS (4:16–23)

4:16–18a. As the Jews continued their work, they were more cautious. Nehemiah had **half the men ... work while the other half** guarded them **with spears, shields, bows, and armor**. Perhaps they were divided around **the wall**: a few workers, next to them a few guards, a few more workers, more guards next to them, and so on. **The officers** in Jerusalem, who apparently

had not yet been given responsibilities in the project, were enlisted to stand guard **behind** the workers. As some workers **carried materials**, presumably bricks and mortar, they each did so with **one hand**, while holding **a weapon** (probably a spear or sword) **in the other**. Each of the wall-workers (masons) worked with both hands but had **his sword at his side**. Though this arrangement meant fewer bricklayers were on the job, the work was well defended!

4:18b–20. In addition, Nehemiah stationed a trumpeter next to him—a man who would follow Nehemiah everywhere he went as he supervised **the work**. In case of an attack, **the trumpet** blast would rally the people to the place of attack. Again, Nehemiah encouraged the people (cf. 2:20; 4:14), this time stating that their **God** would **fight for** them.

4:21–23. The people worked diligently, from early morning till nighttime. Those living outside the city did not even return to their homes. Venturing outside **Jerusalem at night** would have been a dangerous risk. Through each **night** some workers stood guard, knowing the city was vulnerable to attack even then. They did not even take **off** their **clothes** to clean up after work; they kept a diligent watch at all times.

**Cabal, T., Brand, C. O., Clendenen, E. R., Copan, P., Moreland, J. P., & Powell, D. (2007). *The Apologetics Study Bible: Real Questions, Straight Answers, Stronger Faith* (p. 700) Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.**

**4:15** Some have suggested that God is a helpless spectator, unable to prevent misfortune. Nehemiah's experience reveals a much different God. He reveals that God is a sovereign ruler. People can only do so much. When their plans conflict with God's plans, He is able and willing to step in to thwart them (see Gen 50:20; Prov 21:1).

**The Holy Bible: New International Version. (1984). (Ne 4:1-23). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.**