

## Nehemiah: Building a City Within the City, week 5 Pain and Progress (Nehemiah 4:1–14)

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*Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight . . .*

— Nehemiah 4:14

For 141 years, the city of Jerusalem and the church (the city within that city) had lain in ruins. However, with the arrival of Nehemiah and God's hand upon him there was hope in the hearts of the few believers there. They resolved to labor together to rebuild their church and city. From the first day Nehemiah arrived in town, there were some who were unhappy at the prospect of God succeeding through his leadership (2:10). What began as the equivalent of blogging critics escalates into a resistance movement that becomes increasingly dangerous. The remainder of the book of Nehemiah is filled with conflict. Such conflict is painful for leaders, but is simply a part of being an agent of change. Furthermore, such opposition and conflict is in many ways an encouragement because, like Nehemiah, it is usually only in response to success.

People are compelled to become opponents of and to undermine a work of God for a variety of reasons. In my ten years as pastor of Mars Hill, I have experienced the eight underlying motives of opponents, whose efforts range from gossiping, lying, and blogging all the way to disrupting services, threatening violence, and organizing pickets and protests to maximize media exposure:

1. Some people are threatened by the success of another person/organization.
2. Some people are jealous of the success of another person/organization.
3. Some people have an agenda that is in conflict with the mission of God and His people.
4. Some people feel excluded from the power and influence they believe they are entitled to in an organization.
5. Some people take the success of another person/organization as a personal offense because it makes them look bad.
6. Some people are traditionalists and simply oppose change in any form.
7. Some people are demonically inspired to hate God, God's people, and God's work.
8. Some people who have been rebuked or disciplined by a leader/organization become angry and seek revenge.

### **Attack #1 – Ridicule (4:1–3)**

The opposition to the work of God's people for His name, their city, and church started on the psychological level with mockery and ridicule—before Nehemiah and the people even began their work. Their opponents verbally attacked the people, their project, and their materials. Their purpose was to simply discourage and negatively affect the morale of the people. In our day of media spin, talk radio, chat rooms, email chains, and bloggers, this kind of tactic is all the more common and widespread.

Leading the ridicule were two men who were previously described as unhappy with God's plans (2:10). Sanballat was a governor from a nearby town and a powerful man who had no concern for God or God's people and sought only to protect his own power, pleasure, and profit. Tobiah likely married into a Jewish family and although he may have actually claimed to worship the same God as the people he was opposing, his faith was not as important as his political power. People like Tobiah are often very difficult to deal with because they contradict what Scripture says and oppose God's people, yet they tell the press that they too are Christians. This is a very confusing message to unbelievers who cannot understand why Christians would oppose other Christians.

Lastly, by including the specific names of his opponents and their threats in his personal journal, we can infer the personal stress that Nehemiah was under as he led God's people. As a kindred spirit to Nehemiah who has faced many very similar seasons, I find this painful point encouraging.

### **Response #1 – Prayer (4:4–5)**

In response to the ridicule of critics, Nehemiah wisely chose not to engage them. Had he, Nehemiah would have only stoked a fire of conflict and allowed them to win by distracting him from God's mission. Rather than bottling up his frustration or lashing out in anger at his critics, Nehemiah ran to God in prayer as he does continually throughout the book.

Nehemiah's prayer is two-fold. First, he prayed for the blessing of God's people. Second, he prayed for the judgment of their enemies who were ultimately fighting against God Himself. Sadly, some people would say that such prayers of vengeance are only to be found in the Old Testament (e.g., the Psalms) and are not fit for the neighbor-loving commands of the New Testament. However, in such places as Revelation 6:10 and 19:1–3, we see prayerful celebration for the justice of God upon those who refuse to repent and devote themselves to harming God's people in word and deed as instruments in the hand of the enemy.

### **Result #1 – Greater Success (4:6)**

God not only heard Nehemiah's prayer, but also answered it very quickly. Rather than just praying and sitting idly by and waiting for God to act, the people pushed forward together. The people remained focused on their work and did not become distracted by the critics or waste their time on internet message boards responding to every critic and half-truth. As a result, the people redeemed their anger by pouring all of their energies into their work, resulting in visible progress rather quickly.

### **Attack #2 – Threats (4:7–8)**

Seeing the resolve and success of God's people, their opponents (Sanballat and Tobiah) rightly surmised that they would not be able to destroy the work of God through His people on their own. Rather than repenting of their sin, however, they instead became more devoted to destroying God's work. They gathered a coalition of troublemakers and agitators in order to increase the number of people fighting against God's people. Sadly, this kind of plotting remains an effective tool of the enemy. Groups often form for the sole purpose of opposing a leader and his mission even though they otherwise have nothing in common; the only unity they share is a common hatred. It is incredibly ironic that

uniting God's people from various churches and traditions is often impossible, yet their enemies seem to have no such trouble and work together quite easily.

Together, their opponents surrounded the entire city: Sanballat and the Samaritans to the north, Tobiah and the Ammonites to the East, Geshem (2:19) and the Arabs to the south, and the men of Ashdod from the Philistine city to the west. Their plan to attack the city and church was nothing less than a declaration of simultaneous war from every side.

### **Response #2 – Prayer and Security (4:9)**

Again, rather than responding to his critics or wasting his time in pointless negotiations with people who would never be satisfied unless he sinned against God and quit, Nehemiah called the people to prayer. Nehemiah did not naively assume that they would be safe simply because they prayed. He also appointed security detail to remain on the lookout for attacks twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. This provided some sense of security for God's people and also served as a symbol to their enemies that they were resolved to build their city and church at any cost. Our struggles must be fought on both the spiritual and physical level; they both prayed and posted a guard to contend on both fronts.

### **Result #2 – Greater Fear (4:10–12)**

Despite the rather benign response of prayer and defensive security, the enemies of God and His people began making death threats against church members. The situation was quickly escalating and threatened to end in a bloody conflict. The stress upon Nehemiah as the leader responsible for the people under his care was undoubtedly high. Furthermore, even fellow Christians who were for the project became gripped with fear and tried to discourage Nehemiah and his people from proceeding, for fear that they too would be attacked simply by virtue of their association as fellow Christians. To make matters worse, the people themselves were likely both weary from the work and fearful that they would not have the strength to defend themselves and their families from their enemies, who outnumbered and surrounded them.

### **Resolve (4:13–14)**

In light of escalating threats and danger, Nehemiah posted entire families at various points of vulnerability along the wall. Nehemiah was placing a heavy burden upon the fathers and their sons to protect their families. What was really at stake was more than just a city or a church, but the legacy of men and their families as worshippers of God.

This section of Nehemiah is incredibly insightful to me personally. As we have made continual progress building our church as a city within our city devoted to loving and serving the whole city, I have experienced exactly what Nehemiah did. As a result, his example has served as a great model for us over the years as we call our people to love God, their neighbors, and even their enemies, while continuing to build an outpost for God's kingdom in our region. Some of our most vocal and harshest critics have been professing Christians like Tobiah. The enemy is always looking to use a Judas to undermine the work of Jesus. Subsequently, we too have posted security on everything from our technology to our buildings and church services. We have no intent of stopping

the worship of Jesus for thousands in order to appease dozens who could not be satisfied by any changes we would make other than simply ceasing to exist.