

## “Remember the Lord, Who is Great and Mighty”

### The Fourteenth in a Series of Sermons on Ezra-Nehemiah

*Texts: Nehemiah 4:1-14 (sermon on entire chapter); John 15:18-16:4a*

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Nehemiah 3 is a “nothing but the facts” kind of chapter which reflects a genuine kumbaya moment in Israel’s history. Virtually the entire population of Jerusalem joined together to repair the city’s walls. But that sense of peace and unity was about to be put to the test when the city is suddenly threatened by Gentile neighbors and apostate Jews, who did not want to see Jerusalem rise from rubble and ashes and return to the great city it once had been. The work of rebuilding continues in earnest in chapter 4 under the direction of Nehemiah, but with taunts and threats being directed toward the Jews from Israel’s neighbors, there is a new and profound sense of urgency to complete the walls because of threat of imminent attack.

We are continuing our series on Ezra and Nehemiah and now we come to Nehemiah 4, where we find a completely different set of circumstances from that described in chapter 3. As we saw last time, Nehemiah pulled off the remarkable feat of organizing and mobilizing the inhabitants of Jerusalem to undertake the huge task of rebuilding the city’s walls, gates, and defenses. There was a wonderful sense of unity among the inhabitants of Jerusalem as everyone from the high priest to perfume-makers and merchants join together to begin the laborious process of rebuilding the city’s fallen fortifications.

But if unity of the citizens of Jerusalem was the theme of chapter 3, in chapter 4 collective opposition from Israel’s neighbors to the rebuilding project seems to come from all quarters. There are the Samaritans to the north and west (i.e., a mixture of Jewish apostates and “the peoples of the land”—Gentiles relocated there by the Persians). There are Arabian tribes associated with Geshem (“chunky”) which likely included the Idumeans, who were from the provinces immediately to the south of Judah, and while technically under Persian control, were only loosely so. The Ammonites were located to the east of Judah (in what is now Jordan). They too were under Persian administration, but they resented the people of Judah and certainly did not want to see Jerusalem rebuilt, its temple restored, or the nation of Israel prosper once again.<sup>1</sup> A new group of adversaries is mentioned in chapter 4, the descendants of the ancient Philistines (the Ashdodites). They too have a long history of hostility toward Israel.

The chief protagonist in the Book of Nehemiah (first mentioned in chapter two) reappears in chapter 4—Sanballat, who now launches into a prolonged and bitter diatribe against Nehemiah and the people of God. There is really nothing Sanballat can do to stop the rebuilding process, yet that does not keep him from making threats and mocking the Jews and their efforts to rebuild. Since Nehemiah is operating with the full authority of the Persian king Artaxerxes I, Sanballat has no legal authority whatsoever to interfere with the rebuilding project in Jerusalem. Sanballat is very likely resentful of the fact that the king’s cupbearer has been appointed governor over a region (Judah) which, until Nehemiah’s arrival, had been under Sanballat’s control. And as long as Sanballat was in charge, the situation in Jerusalem would remain as it had been—the city would remain in ruins even if the temple itself had been rebuilt.

But now that was all beginning to change—under their new and very capable governor, Nehemiah, the

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<sup>1</sup> Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 225.

Jews were suddenly making great progress in rebuilding the city's walls and gates. Without getting king Atraxerses to change his mind, and having no real basis to attack with his own scant armed forces, Sanballat resorts to ridiculing the Jews. In fact, things have progressed so well in Jerusalem to this point that Sanballat is forced to admit that the Jewish people might actually complete rebuilding the walls in a day—Sanballat is being facetious of course. But nevertheless he is outraged by this development and the only weapons he has against Nehemiah and the citizens of Jerusalem are mockery and threats. Sanballat uses these to full effect—which instead of discouraging the Israelites, boomerangs and produces a renewed sense of purpose on the part of those former exiles who have devoted themselves fully to the rebuilding process and who are working so feverishly to complete the task of rebuilding.

As we turn to our text, verse 1 indicates a sharp change in circumstances from chapter 3. *“Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews.”* The task of rebuilding the walls is described later on in verse 6 with Nehemiah using a metaphor of healing from a wound.<sup>2</sup> But the sense here and throughout chapter 4, is that the emotional scar left on the Jewish psyche by their defeat at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, their being taken into captivity in Babylon, their city being sacked and its temple being destroyed, is finally beginning to heal. The collective sense of shame which hung over the city and its people is finally starting to lift with every gate and section of the wall which rises out of the rubble. The great city is coming back to life.

Since Sanballat has no real basis to object to what is going on in Jerusalem—all he has is personal pique and anger—he loses his cool and becomes enraged by the news that a new governor is in town and that so much work is being done. Sanballat is so angry that in verse 2, Nehemiah reports that Sanballat went into a rant *“in the presence of his brothers and of the army of Samaria, ‘What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore it for themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish up in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, and burned ones at that?’”*

Recall the news footage of Saddam Hussein ranting before a huge crowd of Baath Party loyalists in Baghdad (near the ruins of Babylon), shooting his rifle into the air with everyone in the crowds cheering because they have to. This is pretty much what Sanballat is doing here. Sanballat's rhetorical questions clearly arise from his frustration. Will the Jews restore their city? Yes, they will. Will they sacrifice to YHWH? Yes, they will. Will the rabble in the city finish building in a day? No, but it sure seems like they will, given the rapid progress they are making. Sanballat's rant reflects the Gentile disrespect for YHWH and his people glory in the fact that Jerusalem is in such terrible shape that the walls are nothing but a pile of rubble and the wooden gates have been burned beyond repair. Mockery is about all he can do. His list of options is pretty short.

From what Nehemiah tells us in the opening verses of chapter 4, Samaria, apparently, possessed some sort of armed military force, probably under Persian oversight, which had assembled before him on this occasion for parade and review, during which Sanballat proceeded to unload his disdain for the Jews in Jerusalem. Even if Sanballat's armed force (which was probably quite small) could defeat the Jews, Sanballat cannot use it against them. Artaxerses would not approve, and a Persian client state such as Samaria, could keep an army only with Persian direction—like the US did in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The scene is one of an angry demagogue ranting and raving about the evil Jewish exiles, getting the crowd all worked up, the people cheering at his every word, yet totally frustrated by the fact that they cannot do anything to stop the citizens of Jerusalem from rebuilding the city's walls.

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<sup>2</sup> Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 225.

A red meat speech like this one from Sanballat can only end up where this one does—with a rant in which after the big dog barks, the little dog sets to yapping. The presence of Sanballat’s “brothers” probably refers to his fellow bureaucrats in Samaria, and includes his co-hort, Tobias (his Ammonite servant). As we read in verse 3 “*Tobiah the Ammonite was beside [Sanballat], and he said, ‘Yes, what they are building—if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall!’*” Other than this additional bit of mockery by Tobias about the walls of Jerusalem being so feeble that a fox can knock them down, there is really nothing that Sanballat and his lackeys can do but make wild and irresponsible claims. Nehemiah has pulled off a remarkable feat. It is well-worth noting that the famed archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon while doing her archaeological research in the 1960-70s, determined that the walls of Jerusalem when finished were nine feet thick. A fox is not going to knock walls down which were nine feet thick.

In the midst of recounting Sanballat’s reaction, in verses 4-5 Nehemiah suddenly interjects his own prayer on behalf of himself his people, that they be delivered by YHWH from the likes of Sanballat. “*Hear, O our God, for we are despised. Turn back their taunt on their own heads and give them up to be plundered in a land where they are captives. Do not cover their guilt, and let not their sin be blotted out from your sight, for they have provoked you to anger in the presence of the builders.*” This prayer sounds like many such prayers in the Psalter (Psalm 123 come to mind) or even like a prayer from the prophet Jeremiah. What troubles Nehemiah is that Israel’s foes are mocking YHWH’s work. It is YHWH who turned Artaxerxes’ heart. It is YHWH who arranged for Nehemiah to return to Jerusalem. It is the hand of YHWH which stirred the people of Jerusalem and the surrounding environs to work together as one to rebuild the wall. To mock the process of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem (like Tobias has done), is to mock God.<sup>3</sup> This pierces Nehemiah’s heart.

The irony here is that according to verse 1, Sanballat “heard” that “we were building the walls,” while YHWH will hear the prayers of his people, which will provoke him to anger against Sanballat and his entourage. It is also worth noting that Nehemiah does not return the mockery—he does not make light of Sanballat’s army—but instead out cries to YHWH to avenge his people. Nehemiah is asking that YHWH protect his own honor and that YHWH be the one to judge the actions of those rallying in opposition to the work of the Lord in rebuilding the city. Nehemiah does not complain to Artaxerxes, he does not enlist a group of men to ride over to Sanballat’s palace to set him straight. Nehemiah knows that YHWH alone can and will defend his work and preserve his honor. Nor does Nehemiah speak of Sanballat and Tobias as enemies. These men are opposing God’s work, and so Nehemiah asks God to deal with them accordingly.<sup>4</sup> This is exactly what Paul tells us in Romans 12:17. “*Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.*”

Nehemiah also resolves not to let Israel’s enemies achieve their goal—which is to disrupt the work of rebuilding the walls. After offering his prayer, Nehemiah’s response in verse 6 is simply, “*so we built the wall.*” Nehemiah now suspects that Israel’s enemies may not stop at mockery if they grow angry enough to risk defying the Persians. So Nehemiah also directs a change in the way in which the walls were being reconstructed. “*All the wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work.*” A wall of half its intended height surrounding the entire city offers a significantly better defense than a fully rebuilt wall which is still incomplete and with large openings because entire sections

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<sup>3</sup> Kidner, Ezra and Nehemiah, 91.

0. Davis, Ezra-Nehemiah (part eleven).

are missing. So, while the people were still working at full tilt, a wall of half its final height was extended around the entire city. At long last, the city has the beginnings of a suitable defensive fortification.

Nehemiah made a very wise decision to do this because Sanballat's anger eventually gets the best of him and he continues his saber-rattling with a new, more sinister intensity. Mockery becomes threat. In verses 7-8, Nehemiah reports that "*when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and that the breaches were beginning to be closed, they were very angry. And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it.*" The group of enemies mentioned previously grows with the mention of the Ashdodites (from Ashdod), the ancient home of Philistines, which was directly to the west of Judah. The addition of this group to the west means that Judah was completely surrounded.

If Sanballat was angry before, he is really angry now. If mockery won't work then perhaps the threat of war will. Soon, Sanballat is plotting best how to attack Jerusalem. But this is far easier said than done. For one thing, Sanballat's armed forces would be small and while able to conduct a raid was not equipped for a siege. For another thing, Jerusalem's defenses grow stronger by the hour. The entire city is now surrounded by a wall—even if that wall is half its intended height. And then there is the question of how far Sanballat can actually go when making these threats without going against the will of Artaxerxes. Whatever happens, the citizens of Jerusalem need to be prepared for an attack and go on full alert, while at the same time remaining confident that YHWH is their defender and protector.

Nehemiah does what all Christians should do in times of emergency. We read in verse 9 that "*we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night.*" One commentator puts the matter quite well when he writes, "the partnership of heaven and earth, of trust and good management, is taken for granted as something normal and harmonious."<sup>5</sup> Had Nehemiah not prepared the people for a raid by Sanballat, and then they got wind of the trouble brewing on every side, the people might have panicked, stopped work, and perhaps even fled the area. Should this happen, and the Jews abandon the city, well then, Sanballat gets what he wants without provoking the Persians to wrath. But should word get to Artaxerxes that Sanballat attacked Jerusalem and the Jews defended their city, Sanballat would find himself in great trouble with his boss. Nehemiah knows he must prepare the people for a possible attack when they are most vulnerable—while building the wall.

We read in verse 10 that "*in Judah it was said, 'The strength of those who bear the burdens is failing. There is too much rubble. By ourselves we will not be able to rebuild the wall.'*" An army of civilians is not a very effective fighting force—evidenced in the performance by civilian militias on the field of battle since time immemorial. An army of civilians preparing to fight while building a defensive wall is in a bad spot. Of course, the people grow weary and become fearful of what might happen. Their work in rebuilding is back-breaking, and they have been working at a break-neck pace. Understandably, they are worn-out, but they are not about to give up. The saying common among the people, cited here by Nehemiah, means something like "we are bone weary, and by ourselves will never make it." But they are not by themselves—YHWH is their shield and defender.

At some point, the people of Jerusalem learn of the enemies now plotting to come against them. Mockery is gone. There is now threat of war. Nehemiah reports in verse 11 that, "*our enemies said,*

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<sup>5</sup> Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 91-92.

*‘They will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work.’*” People from Jerusalem and the outlying areas would have eventually learned of Sanballat’s plotting—but this news might be the kind of propaganda someone like Sanballat would have encouraged to reach the city. If the citizen-soldiers learn that they are in for a fight, they might just give up and quit, leaving Jerusalem undefended and the walls unfinished.

The worries grow and there is a hint of panic in the air. Nehemiah reports how *“at that time the Jews who lived near them came from all directions and said to us ten times, ‘You must return to us.’”* Those families who lived outside the city heard the rumors, and fully understood the potential danger to the Jewish settlements near Jerusalem. If an attack came, they have no defense, with all the manpower and focus being centered in Jerusalem. The Jews from these outlying settlements pled with Nehemiah to release the men who lived these outlying towns from working on Jerusalem’s walls, so that they might be able to return to their home villages, and prepare for impending attack. Sanballat’s mockery did not work, but his threats were starting to have the desired effect. It would have been hard indeed to turn down such requests, since the danger these villagers faced was real.

Once again, Nehemiah takes quick and decisive action. According to verses 13-14, *“so in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, in open places, I stationed the people by their clans, with their swords, their spears, and their bows. And I looked and arose and said to the nobles and to the officials and to 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 homes.’”* Nehemiah rises to the occasion, prepares a stout defense, and then reminds the people with a stirring speech worthy of any great general, that this is a fight for your brothers, your sons and daughters, your wives, and your homes! This is truly a “praise the Lord and pass the ammunition” moment, when you prepare for the worst, while praying and hoping for the best. It is a remarkable scene and no doubt his words brought to mind the horrors faced by all their ancestors who were defeated by the Babylonians and then hauled off into captivity. After all that had happened, no one working on those walls—especially those with so much sweat equity invested—was simply going to walk away and let Sanballat and his allies have the city.

In what follows, we have the fourth wise and prompt decision from Nehemiah recounted in this chapter. When first met by the taunts of Sanballat and Tobias, Nehemiah responded in prayer and turned his foes over to YHWH. When discovering Sanballat’s plotting with others, Nehemiah responded with prayer and began the first stages of preparation for battle. When faced by even more serious threats, Nehemiah exhorted the people to take up arms and get in suitable defensive positions. Now, Nehemiah acts decisively yet again. The people of Jerusalem will show Sanballat and his cronies just what they thought of his threats. The people get back to work and construction resumes.<sup>6</sup>

As we read in verse 15, *“when our enemies heard that it was known to us and that God had frustrated their plan, we all returned to the wall, each to his work.”* It soon became clear to Sanballat that his threats were not going to drive the people out of Jerusalem. Nehemiah has called Sanballat’s bluff, by preparing the citizens of Jerusalem for possible attack. We learn from verses 16-20 the details of the plan of battle. *“From that day on, half of my servants worked on construction, and half held the spears, shields, bows, and coats of mail. And the leaders stood behind the whole house of Judah, who were building on the wall. Those who carried burdens were loaded in such a way that each labored on the work with one hand and held his weapon with the other. And each of the builders had his sword*

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<sup>6</sup> Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 93.

*strapped at his side while he built. The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me. And I said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, 'The work is great and widely spread, and we are separated on the wall, far from one another. In the place where you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us.'*"

Those who needed to work with both hands kept their weapons on their belts. Half of the men stood at the ready, so that at the blast of a trumpet they could immediately move to the spot of attack with the weapons needed for defense. Since the wall-builders were spread out and the forces of Sanballat were able to approach Jerusalem from any number of directions, Nehemiah wisely arranges for a mobile defense which could quickly respond and move to any point on the line where they were needed. The work of rebuilding will continue—if at a slower pace. But the people were in a state of readiness, prepared to repel any attack should it come. At the same time, Nehemiah has not let them forget that should Sanballat attack, the people must know that YHWH fights for them (i.e., YHWH will bless their efforts in battle). The common reference to “sword and trowel” comes from this passage.

Sanballat’s threats have not had the desired effect. In fact, instead of scaring the Israelites into a panic he has only steeled their resolve. In verse 21, Nehemiah tells us, *“so we labored at the work, and half of them held the spears from the break of dawn until the stars came out.”* Long days, hard work, and much vigilance was required. Nehemiah also put an end to the soldiers “commuting to work.” *“I also said to the people at that time, 'Let every man and his servant pass the night within Jerusalem, that they may be a guard for us by night and may labor by day.'”* Given the nature of Sanballat’s threats and the real danger faced by small bands of men going in and out of their villages and then traveling back to Jerusalem, coupled with the fact that every able-bodied man was needed in Jerusalem to work on the walls and watch for attack, there will be no more permission for men to return home at night.

Nehemiah is not only a capable leader but sets a solid example for his men. He tells us in verse 23, *“so neither I nor my brothers nor my servants nor the men of the guard who followed me, none of us took off our clothes; each kept his weapon at his right hand.”* The situation is calm and well-in hand. And yet, the actions of Sanballat remind us that the wall is not yet finished, that much remains to be done. The process of rebuilding Jerusalem will not be any easy one. It falls to Nehemiah to lead the people, direct the construction while organizing a defense. So far, Nehemiah has been up to the task, but Sanballat is not finished causing trouble for both Nehemiah and his wall-building citizen-soldiers.

What do we take with us from this remarkable account? As for the historical circumstances, on a personal level it is clear that Sanballat is no match for Nehemiah, although the threats of attack have much more effect than mockery. Nehemiah must stay on top of things, lest Sanballat cause a panic in Jerusalem. Sanballat will become more and more determined to make trouble, and we have not seen the last of him.

The reason for Sanballat’s disdain for Nehemiah and the Jews can be understood on two levels. At the personal level, Sanballat is obviously angered by the fact that the administration of Jerusalem has been taken away from him and given to someone else—Nehemiah. Sanballat preferred that Jerusalem remain just as it was—in ruins. The city had long been the center of Israel’s religion and government, and the chief rival to Samaria, which claimed that the true temple of God was on Mount Gerazim within Samaritan territory—not in Judah, nor Jerusalem. There may be merit to the claim that Horon is the village of Hawara, which is at the foot of Mount Gerazim. If true, Sanballat, the Horonite, had both religious and personal reasons to oppose Nehemiah. To add injury to insult, Nehemiah was not only his replacement, Nehemiah was doing a remarkable job of rebuilding the city which Sanballat prefer remain

in ruins.

On a deeper level, Sanballat's enmity toward Israel and the Jews has a theological explanation—one given us by John in his gospel. As we read in our New Testament lesson (John 15:18-20), *“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.”* Nehemiah has been called by YHWH for the vital task of rebuilding the temple and restoring Jerusalem. Those who reject YHWH and his messianic promises—which are directly tied to Jerusalem and the temple—will quite naturally hate those who follow YHWH and seek to do his will. Of course, men like Sanballat will oppose the people of God. We should not be surprised when we read of them in Scripture, or when we encounter them in the world around us.

Nehemiah reminds us in no uncertain terms that whatever battle in which we find ourselves, we must trust in YHWH to fight for us. In the greatest battle of all—against sin, death, and the curse, Jesus has died for the guilt of our sins, and was raised from the dead for our justification. That battle has already been fought and won. For us, it is now a matter of learning to live in the light of Jesus' victory over death and the grave, and not fear the mockery, threats, and plotting which the Sanballats of the world throw our way. We must make our plans, take up the sword and the trowel, and “remember the Lord, who is great and mighty.”