

V. Nehemiah in Biblical Perspective
The Memoirs of Nehemiah—Arise and Build
“The Sword and the Trowel”
Nehemiah 4
Dr. Harry Reeder
September 18, 2011 – Morning Sermon

We are in Nehemiah 4 in our fifth study on this book. Remember in Nehemiah 3 we had the building of the wall, the fifty two day summation of what happened. We heard who built where, how it was arranged, how they prepared and how they sacrificed. Now some of them didn't show up like the nobles of the Tokoites, but people gave sacrificially to build in front of their own house. What is my part, God? Then secondly, there were some who gave heroically as they took on places where there was no house, so the wall was completely built. Now we get to see what happens behind the scenes. Nehemiah 4:1-6 says *1 Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews. 2 And he said 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?” 3 Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, “Yes, what they are building—if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall!” 4 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. 5 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. 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.*

May God bless the reading of His Word. The grass withers, the flower fades. God's Word abides forever and by His grace and mercy may it be preached for you.

We are right in the middle of a very special occasion where the hand of God's providence has made for us as a congregation a 28 million dollar project into an 8.3 million dollar project that helps us move forward in our vision – for coming generations to be a Christ centered church. It will help our student ministries, children ministries, adult ministries and our board directed ministries for coming generations and those generations not yet born. We are asking God for the sacrificial gifts of His people, not the tithe, not the faith promise and not our mercy gifts but a sacrificial gift that God would work through His people, even in these days of difficulty, to show His hand for His glory and that we'd be able to do this debt free.

So we are trying to follow the Biblical model. How does God's Word direct us? So we are following the Nehemiah model and Nehemiah is following the David model. We are now working our way through the text and in the last study we were in Nehemiah 3 where they built the wall. They were building it counter clockwise just the way he had previously inspected it. We saw proportionate sacrifices as people built in front of their own houses and we saw heroic sacrifices as some went beyond that but it was done with sacrificial gifts, not with the tithes of the people.

I want to ask you a question as we come to Nehemiah 4. Have you ever made a decision in life and wondered what the future holds? Like marriage? Like a job? Lord,

I'm about to make this decision and where is this going to lead me? I know You hold the future so I'm confident but I wonder what's in the future. I don't know all the details about what's in the future for me as a Christian, for me as a pastor or for Briarwood but I do know two things right from this text. If you decide you're going to be a Christ follower – a worshipper, an evangelist, share Christ, love the brethren, engaged in the work of Gospel evangelism and missions, a man or woman of God, a Christian husband or wife, a Christian parent, engaged in the body of Christ, grow in grace and be consistent in grace – then there are two things that will inevitably happen to you.

Let me just get larger in this sense. What about a church? If a church says “We're not just going to be a religious organization. We're the body of Christ, the army of the Lord, the family of God and we want to be on mission, on message, in ministry. We want to do worship which is pleasing to God – God centered worship. We want to do missions where we are reaching unreached people, taking the Gospel around the world. We want to do church planting, church revitalization, deeds of mercy, love and justice. We want to do Gospel deeds and proclaim Gospel words. We are going to be engaged by God's grace and mercy.” Two inevitable things will always happen with that kind of a church and it's the same two that will happen to a Christian.

I want to share with you one of them now and I'll share with you the other one at the conclusion of this study. If you're committed as a believer to being a Christ follower and that is who is a true believer, not a perfect follower but an intentional Christ follower, inevitably you are going to meet adversity. It is absolutely inevitable and there is something else that's inevitable. The people in the city of Jerusalem for almost 200 years have let the walls stay down, the gates burned. God sent His people back under Babylonian captivity under Joshua, under Zerubbabel. They got the altar built and the temple built but they languished. God sent Ezra back and they rose up. Thirteen years later He sent Nehemiah back and he saw that the walls were broken down and the people were broken down. So he took the project of the walls to rebuild them in order to rebuild the people. So the first half is the rebuilding of the walls and the second half is the rebuilding of the people.

Nehemiah 3 is this marvelous narrative of how the wall gets built. It's a summation of who stepped up where, how the sacrifice was done and all that was done but in Nehemiah 4 we get to see the back story. Here we get to see the story behind the story. We get to see the adversity. Recently I was listening to Joshua Harris, a friend of mine in the Gospel Coalition, who said “Nehemiah 3 is the movie happy music and Nehemiah 4 is movie sad music.” Here is my illustration. I don't jog I slog. When I slog I have different things I listen to – sermons and songs. Monday is my tough day so on that day I listen to the score from the movie Rocky. The part I love to get to is when he is jogging and by the end of the song he is leaping the Philadelphia Art Museum with a single bound, with no fatigue. He is in shape and when that big time victory music is playing that is like Nehemiah 3. Then about the time I get to a hill that music ends and the score changes to a “bong, bong, bong” and it's the ring bell, meaning the fight is now starting. This has been fun but now comes the fight. Now there is an opponent, an adversary. Now there's a fight. That's what happens in Nehemiah 4.

They are building the wall. Let's arise and build. We heard the mission – rebuild the wall, rebuild the city. We have said the hand of God is with us. They strengthened their hands for the work and the people arose and built. As soon as they arose and built,

what happened? Sanballat and Tobiah show up and it isn't the first time they show up. Back in Nehemiah 2 when Nehemiah was coming to the city to lead it and they found out he was there for the welfare of the people of the city of God Sanballat and Tobiah tried to stop him but Nehemiah wouldn't be stopped. Then when the people said they would arise and build they came and threatened them but they didn't stop. Now that they are up and building the wall what are Sanballat and Tobiah going to do? Are they going to retreat? No, that is not what they do. They begin to attack.

Here are four tactics of adversity that are brought against people who are on mission, on ministry and in message. Here is tactic number one. Tactic number one is discouragement and paralysis by ridicule and mockery. Go back to the text with me. I love the questions that Sanballat has. It's so predictable. He does some trash talking is what we would call it today. Nehemiah 4:2-3 says **2** *And he said 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?"* **3** *Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, "Yes, what they are building—if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall!"* They are trying to ridicule them and mock them in order to stop them.

By the way, that kind of tactic works in the church today. This tactic is used time and time again. I was watching ESPN the other day and there is this Christian quarterback who played in the Southeastern Conference who is up at Denver now. His name is Tim Tebow. I love his boldness for the Lord and recently they interviewed him. The person interviewing him said "You love Jesus and for God so loved the world that we would not perish so are you telling me if you don't accept Jesus then you can't go to heaven?" Tim Tebow said "That's what Jesus said." The interviewer said "Are you saying they are going to go to hell if they don't have Jesus?" Tebow said "If you say 'no' to Christ then you've said 'no' to the only way to heaven. That means there is only one other destination." He explained it very carefully and very appropriately. For this entire week Tebow has been lampooned, hoisted upon the petard of his own statement and it's really been interesting.

That's why a lot of Christians don't speak up and I'm not talking about being obnoxious or arrogant but just speaking the truth in love, give an account of the hope that is within you with gentleness yet courage. When you do that one of the tactics will be to ridicule you and mock you – in the classroom, on the team, in the business, and in the neighborhood. Don't be angry, just be faithful. If you're angry that reveals that their acceptance is more important to you than God's truth. If you're silent it reveals their acceptance. The world thinks that you will sacrifice your commitment to Christ. You'll get off message, out of ministry and of the mission if they ridicule you because their acceptance as an affirmation is more important to you than God's Word and God's mission.

What was Nehemiah's response? This is not hard. Every time Nehemiah has been faced with adversity what has he done? What is Nehemiah's default program? It has been the priority of intercessory prayer. So that is what he does. He makes a prayer with two requests. Request number one is he prays for God's intervention to encourage the people. Don't let the people be dismayed. God, intervene so that Your people are not discouraged. Then he makes a second request. God, intervene for Your own glory if

these people remain in opposition to You. Notice he doesn't say 'if they have provoked us to anger' but he says 'they have provoked You to anger. So You deal with them for Your own glory.'

Then prayer is joined with action. We tend to think real prayer warriors don't act. No, real prayer warriors act because once they put their utter dependence upon the Lord then they can rise up. Passivity doesn't show our faith. It is an activity that is rooted in utter dependence. It is 100 percent dependent upon the Lord and then 100 percent dependent to follow the Lord. God had given them the mission so when the first tactic of ridicule comes Nehemiah goes to the Lord and then it says in Nehemiah 4:6 'so they built the wall.' I just love the matter of fact way they say that. They got half of it done. I couldn't help but think about that as I was listening to what one of our elders said earlier. Here at Briarwood we have the wall halfway up with the commitments of the leaders for what God has called us to do for the coming generations. So if they have built the wall halfway up I guess that means that Sanballat and Tobiah will have to give up.

No, now we go to tactic number two. Tactic number two is discouragement and paralysis by intimidation and threats. If you continue moving forward through ridicule and mockery what will happen? You will find tactic number two in Nehemiah 4:7-9 which says *7 But 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. 8 And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it. 9 And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night.* We just moved from a cold war of ridicule, mockery and propaganda to a hot war where they put together an alliance of tribes and they encircle the city of Jerusalem with their armies. Now these multitudes are there against these few that are left in the city with walls only at half the height and no army to speak of.

So what is Nehemiah's response to the second tactic? It is prayer. That is what he does. He is a man of prayer. So he calls for the strength of God and then action. He calls upon the Lord to be their protector and their strength and then he takes action by setting the guard because the same God who answers and gives the end also works through the means of His people. So if the cold war doesn't work and the hot war doesn't work then Sanballat and Tobiah will quit, right? No, they are going to keep showing up but by the way, adversity doesn't quit.

Let's look at the third tactic that takes place. When God's people get on mission, on message and in ministry adversity doesn't always come from the outside but it also comes from the inside – the grumbling, the complaining, the naysayers – and that's exactly what happens within Judah. Tactic number three is the discouragement and paralysis of scope and reality. Every time you do something someone has to clean up the garbage and get rid of the rubbish. The people complain and say "This is too much, it can't be done." We are facing the same thing in what Briarwood is doing. People are saying to me "Pastor, are you crazy? You're in a time of economic difficulty and you're really going to take something like this on? Is that actually possible that this could be accomplished? Look at the scope of it and the reality of what has to be done." We see the tactic in Nehemiah 4:10 which says *10 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."*

What does Nehemiah do? I know he continues praying but he also gives leadership and perseverance and they stayed at the wall. They kept at the mission. He did not let the scope and the reality discourage the people because the leadership stayed with it.

Then comes the fourth adversity from the text and it is also from within. The fourth tactic is discouragement and paralysis of danger and anxiety. Nehemiah 4:11-14 says **11** *And our enemies said, "They will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work."* (here comes the adversity from the inside) **12** *At that time the Jews who lived near them came from all directions and said to us ten times, "You must return to us."* **13** *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.* **14** *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."*

So what is Nehemiah doing? Remember the statement, by ourselves we can't do this and they were right. There is only one thing, they are not by themselves. The Lord is with them. Then when the threat of them saying 'we're going to sneak in and kill you and stop the work' ten times people from back home sent message to the workers from all different directions saying "listen you're going to get killed. It won't just cost you the sacrifice of resources it may cost you your life to do this. Come home.'

I love history and I love to read about men and women who stay the course under adversity. One of the things that was amazing about World War II was how the women of this nation stepped up to free the men of so many things for them to go. When I read of men in their journals who are overseas or in the South Pacific they would record what their wives would write to them. Their wives would say "I miss you. I want you home. Be safe but don't come home until the job is done." What heroic courage! Instead of undermining those at the wall they encouraged them. The Lord will sustain us and take us through this as families come together and go through processes. That's why I love projects like this because you get to build bigger things in your life like prayer is a way of life, sacrifice is a way of life, trusting in the Lord is a way of life and the occasion provides the occasion simply to build these things into our lives. So instead of sending word that discourages we send word to move forward.

So what is the response? The leadership is proclaiming the sufficiency of God while calling both leaders and people to sacrifice 'for the coming generations.' Nehemiah proclaims first of all the sufficiency of God. Remember the Lord, He is great and awesome. Then he speaks to the leaders and the rest of the people saying "I want you to stay at it, sacrifice and be willing to put your trust in the hands of the Lord in the midst of the adversity for coming generations." I'm kind of slipping that coming generations in there because it's there. He said to the nobles and the leaders, "Stay at the wall. Give yourself; sacrifice for your wives, your brothers, your sisters, your sons, and for your daughters, for the coming generations, not just you but for the coming generations."

I want to give you one takeaway but before I do let's look at this summation in Nehemiah 4:15-18 says **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.* **16** *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, 17 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. 18 And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built. The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me. They don't have a lot of people and they have all this adversity. Remember the Lord, they set a guard, they went back to the wall but half of the people aren't working. What are they doing? They are guarding. The half that are working are working with one hand and a weapon in the other – the sword and the trowel. They are staying at it.

It goes on to say in Nehemiah 4:19-20, **19** *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. 20 In the place where you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us."* Where is Nehemiah? He is right where the trumpet is. Rally to us, we'll be there. I'll be there, the leaders will be there, the trumpet is the sound. Don't rally to the trumpet but rally to us. When I read that a couple of weeks ago I thought "I'm back at football practice." I remember the two things my coach said to me at every practice during those days in August. He would say "Play to the whistle and run to the ball." David rushed at Goliath. Nehemiah's people went to the wall. If they attack go to the trumpet and you'll find us right there. Now you will know who aren't leaders by title but leaders by action. We'll be at the point of trouble. "Our God will fight for us."

Nehemiah 4:21-23 says **21** *So we labored at the work, and half of them held the spears from the break of dawn until the stars came out. 22 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." 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.* So he had 52 days and what did Nehemiah call the people and leaders to do? We are at it, we're going to finish it and we're going at it 24/7 for 52 days. Here the sacrifice was made, each one stepping before them.

So what's the takeaway? The message of Nehemiah and the memoir of Nehemiah are unmistakable. J.I. Packard put it best in his commentary. Packard said, "Nehemiah chapters 4 through 6 is nothing more than spiritual warfare. When God's people step into the prey then they will have adversity. Spiritual warfare and adversity is not a subset of the engaged Christian life, it is the Christian life. Most of us think and that's why most of us make this comment, "Oh I think I'm under spiritual warfare." I make it too. If you're a Christian and you're on mission, on message and in ministry you will always be in spiritual warfare.

There are only two reasons you won't have spiritual warfare in this life. One is if you went to the side lines because he'll leave you alone. If you go to the bench, go to the side lines, get off the playing field or if you leave the battlefield he'll leave you alone. If you say 'no' to the battleship and 'yes' to the cruise ship he'll just wave to you. But if you're in the battle, if you're engaged you will have adversity. The other time he'll leave you alone is when Jesus comes back adversity is over but until He comes back, if you're engaged spiritual warfare is not a subset of the Christian life, it is the Christian life. If there's not warfare in my life that means I'm not engaged.

Let me just unfold this a little bit for you. Why is this true? Number one is the inevitability of our Adversity is because of the Reality of our Adversary. The devil is known as the Liar. What is another name for him? He is known as the fallen angel, Satan, and Adversary. Why is he known as the Adversary? It is because he brings adversity. Forget Sanballat and Tobiah. There will always be Sanballats and Tobiahs. You need to know who is behind Sanballat and Tobiah. We don't wrestle against flesh and blood, Sanballats and Tobiahs, we wrestle against principalities, powers of darkness, against the Evil One. I have some great news for you but I want to remind you Nehemiah knew it intuitively because he saw the power of his God. He said "Remember our great and awesome God." You stand on another side 2500 years later. Your great and awesome God didn't stay in heaven. He came to earth and defeated Satan at the cross. The Lion who would roar against you has pulled his teeth. He has put a chain on him. He has bound the strong man. Now go plunder his house. We will not fear him. Now that doesn't mean I don't know that he is greater than me but greater is He that is in me than he that is in the world. Christ has won the victory at the cross. There will be adversity because you have an adversary but your Champion has won the victory. Remember the Lord fights for you. There will be battles but He has won the war.

Secondly, the intensity of the Adversity is directly related to the intentionality of our obedience and the significance of the opportunity. The last thing Satan wants is out at that youth barn another generation of Christ followers to come, another generation of Christian leaders for the church or another generation of Christian leaders from the church into the world. The last thing he wants is another generation of pastors or missionaries. The opportunity is significant. Our obedience is intentional therefore you can rest assured that that adversity will be clear. It may be mental, emotional, psychological or physical but that adversity will be there. Will ridicule and mockery stop them? No, well then we'll go from a cold war to a hot war. Will that stop them? No, then let's put a fifth column with grumbling, complaining, naysayers and discouragers in the midst of them. He ratchets up his adversity when we remain intentional in our obedience and the opportunity is great.

Another thing is when he ratchets up adversity, adversity is a 360 degree experience. I love it when it said "They came from all directions." He comes outside. He comes inside. I think of the Rocky speech, "We'll hit him with the right, we'll hit him with the left, we'll run around him and we'll run through him." That's the way he wants to do it. He will come from any and every direction. He'll come from within a family, within a church, he loves to put naysayers in pulpits and in fact, he loves to take well meaning people of God and get them off message, off mission and off ministry in order to discourage God's people. So he comes 360 degrees.

Here is a fourth thing in this adversity. Response to adversity is simple. Don't run. It is prayer and obedience not discouragement and fear (despair). With prayer we call upon the Lord, "Lord, we are not able to win this battle but we call upon You. You fight the battle. We are Your instruments. Here we are. We're present. We're ready." Response to adversity is prayer and obedience not discouragement and fear. Do not fear for the Lord our God will be with you.

Finally, victory over adversity is found not in its absence but in its defeat and in God's exaltation. I love it when it said "God frustrated their plans." Victory over adversity isn't clear sailing. You see victory right here in Nehemiah 4 but in Nehemiah 5

and 6 there is more adversity. In Nehemiah 10, 11 and 12 there is more adversity. In this world on this side of eternity you will have adversity. Jesus said this “In the world you have tribulation but take courage I have overcome the world.” So adversity is there. The victory does not disappear. The victory is that God defeats it through His people, their prayers and their obedience and then as He defeats it God is exalted. He said “God defeated them.” God fought the battles. Certainly Nehemiah knew the people were showing courage and his leaders were with him. Praise the Lord for them but he knew the victory was of the Lord and from the Lord. That’s when you know God has given victory over adversity. It is the defeat of Satan’s strategies and the exaltation of God.

The question still remains, who will sacrifice? Who will go to the wall? Who will rally to the trumpet? I do not understand why any athlete or any athletic team ever takes on cupcakes. I know the adversity is great. I wouldn’t have it any other way because it reminds us that without Him we can do nothing but we can do all things through Him. When the victory comes He gets the glory. I wouldn’t have it any other way. Lord, I don’t know what adversity is out there and I’m not praying for it but I do know You use it.

It’s in Your hands because through it You make Your people Yours and You show Yourself in Your great power so when the trumpet sounds, run to the sound of the trumpet, not only will you find God’s people there but the coming generation. To the coming generations run to the trumpet for your families, your brothers, your sisters, your sons, your daughters and the generations that aren’t even born yet. Run to the sound of the trumpet and answer the question, Sanballat, who will sacrifice? I will sacrifice, because when I get to the trumpet I won’t just see a trumpet, a trumpeter or just leaders but the Lord will be there with His people. The Lord will be at the sound of the trumpet. So we will arise and rush to the wall. Let’s pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the moments we have been able to be together. Lord, this is a big week in our life before us as a congregation. I thank You that You are able and that the battle is the Lord’s and our God will fight for us. So Father, here we are as soldiers of Christ to arise. There are two things we know. If we stay on mission, on ministry and on message inevitably we’ll have adversity but the other thing we know is our God is with us. Great and awesome is His Name. The battle is His and the victory belongs to the Lord so the people have a mind to work, I pray in Jesus’ Name, Amen.