



Nehemiah 4-5

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Tape #7150
By Chuck Smith

Let's turn now in our Bibles to Nehemiah chapter four. Nehemiah has been appointed by king Artaxerxes, the Longitimus of secular history, as the governor over Judaea. He comes back to Jerusalem with the decree of the king and the commission of the king to restore and to rebuild Jerusalem. As he first returns he does not reveal to the people what his full mission is but at night he goes out and surveys the walls and he establishes his plan for the rebuilding of the walls. Then he informs them of the fact that he has the authority of the king of Persia to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. He establishes then which families will work on which section of the wall so that the whole wall will go up at once all the way around the city, with each group being assigned a certain section of the wall and the various gates are to be built by the certain groups. It's gonna be a project that's gonna move on rather rapidly because it's well designed and well planned.

As the whole program is set out, the people began the building of the wall and immediately the enemy's roundabout them are upset and they seek to hinder and they seek to oppose the rebuilding of the wall.

But it came to pass, that when Sanballat (5:1).

Who is one of the leaders of the opposition.

But it came to pass, that when Sanballat heard that we build the wall, he was wroth [angry] and took great indignation, and mocked the Jews. And he spake before his brethren and the army of Samaria, and said, What do these feeble Jews [think they're going to do]? Will they fortify themselves? Will they [offer] sacrifice? Will they make an end in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of the rubbish which are burned? (4:1-2).

Will they take this burnt limestone and try to make a wall out of that?

Now Tobiah (4:3).

Who was the other leader of the opposition.

the Ammonite was by him, and he said, Even that which they build, if a fox go up, he shall even break down their stone wall (4:3).

They made fun of the task, they ridiculed them, they mocked the work that they seeking too so. Ridicule and mockery is a tool that the enemy often uses to oppose the work of God. The work of God in your life. When you commit your life to Jesus Christ, you can expect that the friends around you, some of them are gonna begin to mock, "Oh are you gonna be one of those little holy holy's and roll on the ground?" and they begin to make fun, ridicule.

Ridicule is something that is extremely hard on our flesh. No one likes to be ridiculed, no one likes to be put down, it's something that our flesh rebels against and unfortunately there are many people who have been ridiculed right out of the kingdom of heaven. People who made a start...Jesus said, when the seed is planted it falls on various types of soil and some of it fell by the wayside and the birds came and ate it and plucked it up and it didn't even have a chance to develop. The birds of course are always symbolic of Satan's work and there are many people who hear the word but it doesn't even have a chance to take root in their lives because the moment someone hears that they went to church, then they start this old ridicule, put down, mockery bit and the person just lets it drop right there. They never go any further. It's a very powerful tool that Satan uses to defeat that work of God in your life.

Now Nehemiah's response to the ridicule was that of prayer. As we looked last week, we discovered that Nehemiah was a man of prayer and in any kind of an emergency situation, the first thing he thought of was prayer. What to God that that was the first thing we always would think of. We usually think of how we can get out of this and we start scheming and it's not until we are really trapped and the top is coming down that we then begin to pray. Prayer is so often our last resort but with Nehemiah it was the first resort and if you use it as the first resort then you'll never get to the last resort of desperation.

When he was remembered taking the cup to the king, he'd been praying for three months that he might be able to do something to go back to Jerusalem and encourage the people who were so discouraged, demoralized, and the place was just a mess. It broke his heart when his brother Beneniah gave him this report. So he was praying and fasting and so he took the cup before the king and the king said to him, "How come you're so sad," because Nehemiah was generally speaking a very happy jovial tone and the king said, "You're not sick, this must be a sorrow heart, what's your problem?" and Nehemiah said, "I prayed unto the God of Heaven and I said unto the king". So even before he speaks up to the king, he throws up one of those quick little prayers.

Here, they are faced with the opposition. These people are ridiculed, they're mocking. When a person doesn't have a good argument then they always will mock the opposition, they will start calling them names. Notice how the liberals, rather than really stating well their cause, they just seek to put down anyone who would oppose their cause. If you would dare to oppose the cause of the liberals then you're just a narrow-minded bigot. They just put you down with a name. The evolutionists, rather than really presenting any positive evidence, just seek to put down who doesn't believe in evolution he's just some kind of a nincompoop. They'll put you down with a name and call you just ignorant and all but don't give a solid argument in their own defense. Very common method that is used and Satan plays it very skillfully to discourage the work. The answer is prayer.

Nehemiah prayed.

Hear, O our God; for we are despised: and turn their reproach upon their own head, and give them for a prey in the land of captivity: And cover not their iniquity, and let not their sin be blotted out from before thee: for they have provoked thee to anger before the builders (4:4-5).

So God, take care of them, judge them, don't let them get by with this.

So built we the wall; and all the wall was joined together unto the half thereof: for the people had a mind to work (4:6).

I like that phrase, "the people had a mind to work" (4:6). God put it their hearts to do it and in just a very short time, the wall was built half way to the height that they were planning to build it. That's what it means, "So the wall was joined together unto the half thereof," that means it was half way up already in just a short time. They were so excited, they had a mind to work, they went about it and they had the thing halfway up.

But it came to pass, that when Sanballat, and Tobiah, and Arabians, and the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites, heard that the walls of Jerusalem were made up and that the breaches began to be stopped, then they were very wroth [angry]. And conspired all of them together to come and fight against Jerusalem, and to hinder it (4:7-8).

Unable to stop the work through ridicule, now they decide a direct assault against the people. They're gonna get their army together, they're going to come against Jerusalem, they're going to seek to physically harass and stop the work of God. So they "conspired all of them together to come and fight against Jerusalem" (4:8).

Nevertheless we made our prayer unto our God, (4:9).

Again Nehemiah is just a man of prayer. The first thing he does is pray.

and set a watch against them day and night, because of them (4:9).

Prayer does not preclude activity, it precedes activity. Prayer is never an excuse to do nothing, it's never an excuse just to be fool-hearty, "Well I just prayed about it and I'm just going to trust the Lord to do it." Well what did the Lord tell you to do? A person says, "well, I'm just going to pray the Lord will help my car to run without any gas. Heading to Los Angeles and my tank is empty but I'm just praying that God will help me to get there." No! No! Pray, if you need to, that God will give you the money to buy the gas. But there are people who are often times, fool-hearty. They don't use common sense and they use prayer as an excuse for doing nothing for just laziness or slothfulness. So as in the beginning, "I prayed unto the Lord and I said unto the king," now "We prayed unto God and we set the watch against them day and night because of the threat" (4:9).

So they took practical steps to thwart the attacks of the enemy. They set the watchmen up there day and night to watch for the attacks. It wasn't just, "Well we prayed about it and we just let it go now," but they took very practical steps to defend themselves against the enemy. And God expects us to be practical.

My little granddaughter used to say, "God gave me a brain and he wants me to use it," and she was so right.

We prayed and we set our watch. Now they're both important. We are not to neglect prayer, just setting the watch itself is not enough. We need to pray and set the watch. It's that combination of prayer and wise precautionary measures. Prayer and prudence. To many people it's just prayer and presumption. That's not good.

Now Satan sought to oppose them in another way, and this was more subtle and dangerous in many ways. Many times we can handle the attacks from outside, it's the attacks from within where we become so vulnerable.

Our one daughter went to an evangelical Christian College her first year. It was probably the most difficult year of her life in her Christian experience. She had been and had always been a dynamic witness for Jesus Christ. She has spunk and she speaks up. At Harbor High school when she was going through high school, when any of the teachers would say anything about Christians or the Christian faith, she would always speak right up in class and challenge them. They would make some off the wall statement, "All Christians believe..." and she'd say, "Wait a minute, I'm a Christian and I don't believe that junk. What do you mean all Christians? Aren't you generalizing?" I mean she'd just really nail them. She had that kind of courage in high school, she just stood up. In her annual, a couple of the teachers wrote, "Thank you for being in my class, you helped me to discover the light, you brought me to a faith in Jesus Christ". She was just that kind of a gal.

But she went off to this evangelical Christian college and she found it extremely tough because she thought that at a Christian college all of the kids are gonna be really committed to the Lord. It was there that she faced all kinds of ridicule. Ridiculed because she maintained her virginity, ridiculed because she wouldn't go out and drink and it was hard because she was anticipating these kids to all be committed Christians and they were worse than the worldly kids in many places and in many cases. It was tough with these kids coming from Christian homes and evangelical churches, wanting to do these things. She said, "I don't want to go back to school up there". The next year she went to UCI and she cruised. She was expecting the opposition, she was expecting the attacks and she could handle those frontal attacks, it was this insidious little insight stuff from supposedly the support group of the Christians where the attacks were hard and hard for her to handle. She loved the challenge of just being in a secular college and again speaking up for Christ and challenging the professors, she loved that. She said, "You know it was so much easier to live for Jesus Christ at UCI than it was at the Christian College". Sort of a shame but that's the way she found it.

Now the next opposition comes from within.

And Judah said, The strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed, and there is much rubbish; so that we are not able to build the wall (4:10).

Discouragement from within. These guys are just wiped out; they're too tired. There is so much rubbish around; we just can't do it Nehemiah. We've gone as far as we can, we're worn out, we can't do it. And then there were rumors that began to fly. They said,

And our adversaries said, They shall not know, neither see, till we come in the midst among them, and slay them, and cause the work to cease (4:11).

You know, these guys are going to sneak in and they are going to destroy us. They are planning an attack. So they weren't sleeping well, they were weary, they were tired, their strength was decayed and so they just wanted to give up.

And it came to pass, that when the Jews which dwelt by them came, they said unto us ten times, From all places whence ye shall return unto us they will be upon you (4:12).

These attacks are coming. They're getting ready for a surprise attack. Ten times they brought this warning to Nehemiah. So Nehemiah said,

Therefore set I in the lower places behind the wall, and on the higher places, I even set the people after their families with their swords, their spears and their bows (4:13).

So he just set these guys ready to fight. They were all armed. They had their swords, their spears, their bows. In the upper parts, when the enemy would come, they would see there were people in the defense position but then he also had guys set down lower so if should they come through they could be able to ambush them.

And I looked, and rose up, and said unto the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the people, Be not ye afraid of them: (4:14).

Fear is a tool that Satan often uses against the child of God.

Be not ye afraid of them: remember the Lord, (4:14).

That is always the cure for fear. The cause for fear is getting our eyes upon the enemy and the threats of the enemy and that will cause fear, but the cure for fear is getting your eyes on the Lord. Hey, remember the Lord. You're forgetting something; "greater is he that is with us". He is within. Remember the Lord. David said, "Yeah though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for thou art with me". Remember the Lord. Remember that the Lord is with you and when you come again into the consciousness that the Lord is with me, the Lord is on my side. As David said, "I will not fear what my enemy shall seek to do to me". The Lord is with you.

I think that one of the greatest exhortations is one that was given by this little saint of God that we knew for so many years, she used to always say, whenever I would bring up a problem or a difficult situation, she'd say, "Charles, God is on the throne". All right, I can handle that. I can handle anything; God's on the throne and we need to remember that. Remember the Lord, the Lord is on the throne. The Lord who is great and awesome.

Now you remember that the Lord is with you, get your eyes on the Lord but then you go out and fight.

which is great and terrible, and fight for your brethren, your sons, and your daughters, your wives and your houses (4:14).

Hey, this is life and death, get out and fight for your family but remember the Lord is with you. It is in his strength that we go forth against the enemy in his name.

And it came to pass, when our enemies heard that it was known unto us, and God had brought their counsel to nought, [nothing] that we returned all of us to the wall, every one unto his work (4:15).

That plan of the enemy was thwarted and the work went on.

And it came to pass from that time forth, that the half of my servants wrought in the work, and the other half of them held both the spears, the shields, and the bows, and the habergeons; and the rulers were behind all the house of Judah. They which builded on the wall, and they that bare burdens, with those that laded, every one with one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other hand held a weapon (4:16-17).

Those that were handling the trowels with one hand and the other hand, their sword or their spears.

For the builders, every one had his sword girded by his side, (4:18).

As they worked they were ready to fight; they were girded for the battle.

and so builded. And he that sounded the trumpet was by me. And I said unto the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the people, The work is great and large, and we are separated upon the wall, one far from another. In what place therefore ye hear the sound of the trumpet, resort ye thither unto us: our God shall fight for us. So we laboured in the work: and half of them held the spears from the rising of the morning till the stars appeared (4:18-21).

These guys were working long hours from the time the sun came up in the morning until the stars appeared at night they were out there working on the wall.

Likewise at the same time said I unto the people, Let every one with his servant lodge within Jerusalem, that in the night they may be a guard to us and labour on the day. So neither I, nor my brethren, nor my servants, nor the men of the guard which followed me, none of us put off our clothes, saving that every one put them off for washing (4:22-23).

They just really, day and night, were occupied in this task. They would gather in the city at night for protection and then sunrise they'd go out and do the work. They just didn't take anytime off except of course the Sabbath day and the washing of their clothes.

And there was a great cry of the people and of their wives against their brethren the Jews (5:1).

Culturally, these people often wail. In fact, if you remember, they used to call it the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. When the women joined with the wail, it becomes very shrill, very high-pitched. One of the interesting things to do in Jerusalem is to go to the Western Wall on the day that they are having their barmitzvahs, which is usually Friday in the morning. You see these little boys going through the barmitzvahs ceremony and the lady's standing, they can't go into the men's court but they stand at the fence and they let out these shrills, they throw candy over the wall at the little boy. It's fascinating, it's cultural and it's fascinating. As you hear all of the wailing, it gives you a little bit of insight into this complaint, "the great cry of the people and their wives against their brothers and the Jews" (5:1).

For there were that said, We, our sons, and our daughters, are many: therefore we take up corn for them, that we may eat, and live. Some also there were that said, We have mortgaged our lands, vineyards, and houses, that we might buy corn, because of the dearth. There were also that said, We have borrowed money for the king's tribute, and that upon our lands and vineyards. Yet now our flesh is as the flesh of our brethren, our children as their children: and, lo, we bring into bondage our sons and our daughters to be servants, and some of our daughters are brought unto bondage already: neither is it in our power to redeem them; for other men have our lands and vineyards (5:2-5).

What had happened is that the people with large families, the poorer people, were being taken advantage of by the richer ones. They didn't have enough to buy the corn to feed their large families. What they were having to do is to sell their children into slavery just to get by. Those who had the money were buying the slaves and then they were giving mortgages on the property and charging super interest so the people were in one of those traps when you couldn't even make the interest payments. You owed more than what you borrowed, as the interest would build up. So they got in a whole and there was no getting out and so they came to Nehemiah with a complaint about how they were being oppressed by the rich people. They had sold everything they had, they mortgaged their houses, their lands just to pay the taxes and now taxes are coming due, we don't have anything left, we don't have food for our families and the rich were just getting richer. They were taking advantage of the poor and living off the poor.

So greed, the greed of their own brethren, was threatening their very existence. They had sold some of their daughters already and they didn't have the money to redeem them.

And I was very angry when I heard their cry and these words (5:6).

These rich people were actually in violation of the laws of Moses.

Then I consulted with myself, and I rebuked the nobles, and the rulers, and said unto them, Ye exact usury, every one of his brother. And I set a great assembly against them (5:7).

He gathered together all the people. He got these guilty rich people there, all these nobles and all, and he gathered together all the people.

And I said unto them, We after our ability have redeemed our brethren the Jews, which were sold unto the heathen: and will ye even sell your brethren? Or shall they be sold unto us? Then held they their peace, and found nothing to answer (5:8).

Now Nehemiah says look, we have redeemed these fellows from their captivity to the Persians. We purchased them from their slavery to the Persians to bring them back here to live and now will you take advantage of this? Will you take them as slaves?

Also I said, It is not good that ye do: ought ye not to walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the heathen our enemies? (5:9).

He challenged them because they weren't obeying the commandment of God, for the law definitely forbid them to do this.

I likewise, and my brethren, and my servants, might exact of them money and corn: I pray you, let us leave off this usury [high interest on the money] (5:10).

He said, Look, I have the authority to exact from them taxes, corn and all. Then he went on one further.

Restore, I pray you, to them, even this day, their lands, their vineyards, their oliveyards, and their houses, also the hundredth part of the money, and of the corn, the wine, and the oil, that ye exact of them (5:11).

I ask you to return it to them now.

Then said they, We will restore them, and will require nothing of them; so will we do as thou sayest. Then I called the priests, and took an oath of them, that they should do according to this promise (5:12).

I want you to swear to me that you're gonna do this. It's interesting that it was the priests that were the ones that were really guilty in this thing.

Also I shook my lap, and said, So God shake out every man from his house, and from his labour, that performeth not this promise, even the be he shaken out, and emptied. And all the congregation said, Amen, and praised the LORD (5:13).

They were happy over this edict and suddenly they have their houses back, their vineyards back, everything is returned to them. Of course, they're greatly strengthened in their whole determined and resolve after this.

And the people did according to this promise (5:13).

It was fulfilled. Nehemiah speaks then a little bit of his own personal example of unselfishness.

Moreover from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year even unto the two and thirtieth year of Artaxerxes the king, that is, twelve years, I and my brethren (5:14).

Nehemiah had some brothers their with him and these are personal blood type brother, Hananiah being one. And Hananiah is with him, as we'll find out in chapter seven.

I and my brethren have not eaten the bread of the governor (5:14).

In other words, we didn't live off the people. We provided for ourselves.

But the former governors that had been before me were chargeable unto the people, and had taken of them bread and wine, beside forty shekels of silver; yea, even their servants bare rule over the people: but so did not I, because of the fear of God (5:15).

Ezra was the former governor, Zerubbabel was the former governor and they did receive from the people but Nehemiah said not me, "I had the fear of God and I didn't take from them," (5:15). Do you remember when Paul the apostle wrote his letter to the Corinthian church he said, "You know how that when I was with you I laboured working with my own hands to provide for the needs of myself and my group lest I be chargeable to any of you". I provided for myself, I didn't take any offerings, I didn't take any money from you because I didn't want you think that my purpose was to make merchandise of you, that I was doing it for a personal enrichment or gain.

I could really admire and go for an evangelists who would come in and not ask for anything for himself. My what a refreshing change that would be. So many times people put such heavy emphasis upon money; heavy emphasis upon giving and the offering is one of the main things of the whole service. They just really put the pressure on the people to pledge and to give and so forth. Nehemiah said, Hey I didn't take anything from you. Why? Because I fear God. Does that mean if the evangelist places a huge emphasis upon money and offerings that he doesn't fear God? I'll let you answer that.

Yea, also I continued in the work of this wall, neither bought we any land: (5:16).

We didn't try to take advantage of the poor person that was being foreclosed on and buy his land. I didn't buy any land.

and all my servants were gathered thither unto the work (5:16).

We were here, we were working, my servants all worked on the law and we didn't take advantage of anybody. We weren't here to enrich ourselves; we were here to give.

Moreover there were at my table an hundred and fifty of the Jews and rulers, (5:17).

Man I was feeding the crowd.

beside those that came unto us from among the heathen that are about us (5:17).

A big group of people would gather to eat.

Now that which was prepared for me daily was one ox and six choice sheep; also fowls were prepared for me, and once in ten days store of all sorts of wine: yet for all this required not I the bread of the governor, because the bondage was heavy upon this people (5:18).

The people, he felt sorry for them. He realized they didn't have anything and thus he didn't exact things from them but he was there just to freely give of himself for the people.

Now he puts in this little postscript to God.

Think upon me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people (5:19).

Lord; don't forget what I've done here. Of course we must remember he was living at that time of the law and was seeking righteousness through the works of the law and he didn't understand the grace of God as we have come to know and understand it today, he was living in a different era.

Shall we pray? Father, we thank You now that You are there to guide, to direct, to strengthen, to help. Lord we know that the enemy is strong and seeks to resist the work of God from going onward but Lord You're stronger. Help us to keep our eyes upon You. Help us Lord to be diligent and to do what we must do as we rely upon You and trust in You Lord for our strength and for our health. Bless Your people, strengthen Your people, minister Father, by Your Spirit, unto them this week. In Jesus name, Amen.