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Samaritan Opposition to the Building of the Walls of Jerusalem Nehemiah 4: 1-15

Samaritan opposition to the building of the walls of Jerusalem DIG: Why do you think Sanballat was so opposed to Nehemiah's efforts? What weapons does he use against Nehemiah and his team? How effective were their taunts in slowing down the building project? To whom does Nehemiah turn in the face of opposition (4:10)? Does he say anything that surprises you? What effect does his prayer have on his own people? What is the next threat brought against Nehemiah's team (4:7-8)? How did the Jews meet the threat? The next threat was primarily internal, from within their own ranks - what was it? How does Nehemiah encourage his people to persist? What does he want them to remember (4:14)?

REFLECT: When have you or your place of worship ever attempted something so big it was beyond human control, but within God's provision? Describe your big dream or vision. Which gives you more difficulty: External criticism or internal fears? Why? What is one area of your life where there seems to be "heaps of rubble?" How are you cooperating with others and trusting God to build something out of that rubble? What does it mean to resist the devil (First Peter 5:9)? How is this done, in practical terms?

445 BC During the ministry of Nehemiah (to see link click [Bt](#) - The Third Return).

Compiled by the Chronicler from the Ezra and Nehemiah Memoirs (see [Ac](#) - Ezra-Nehemiah from a Jewish Perspective: The Nehemiah Memoirs).

Anyone who steps into the arena of leadership must be prepared to pay the price. That's part of the leadership package. True leadership exacts a heavy toll on the whole person - and the more effective the leadership, the higher the price. The leader must face the fact that he or she will be the target of critical darts.

Unpleasant as it may sound, you haven't really led until you have become familiar with the stinging barbs of the critic. That implies one thing: good leaders must have thick skin. **In the eighth example of leadership in the life of Nehemiah, wise leaders have the ability to handle criticism** (see [Bt - The Third Return](#)).

Anyone who is serious about serving **ADONAI** as a leader in the congregations of **God** should make a serious study of Paul. His life offers a pattern that people in leadership should follow. **Second Corinthians** is a key book because he talks more about himself there than in any of his others. We should not be surprised, therefore, to read an honest admission about the toll of the ministry in Paul's life: **But we have this treasure [the gospel] in jars of clay [our frail human bodies], so that the surpassing greatness of the power may be from God and not ourselves (Second Corinthians 4:7)**. There is no power in a **clay pot**. It is fragile and plain. It often leaks. The passage of time only makes **the vessel** weaker. Paul was saying that the manifestation of power comes not from **the pot**, but what **the pot** contains.

Next, Paul describes the life of frail human vessels. **We are hard-pressed in every way, yet not crushed; perplexed, yet not in despair; persecuted, yet not forsaken; struck down, yet not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Yeshua, so that the life of Yeshua may also be revealed in our mortal body (Second Corinthians 4:8-10)**. **Always** is the key word here. The marks of **death** are **always** evident in the lives of **God's** leaders because **He** wants to display the life of **Yeshua in the clay pot**. **He** uses imperfect **people, clay pots**, to display **His** glory. It is also emphasized in this passage that opposition is inevitable. A godly leader always carries the telltale marks of **death**.²³³

Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he became very angry and was greatly enraged (Nehemiah 4:1a). **He** knew that a restored **Jerusalem** would lessen **his** influence in Judah. On the surface, **he** was outraged that **the Jews** had overridden **his** authority in the region by gaining the support of **the king** (see [Bw - The Response of King Artakh'shasta](#)). But the deeper truth was that **he** was an enemy of **God** - and therefore an enemy of **God's people**. **He** could not stand the thought that **the Jews** were going to prosper and **rebuild their beloved City**.²³⁴

Thus, **He mocked the Jews (Nehemiah 4:1b) in the presence of the Samaritan leaders**. For **mockery** to have any effect, requires a sympathetic audience, so **Sanballat** attempted to draw others into **his** hatred of **the Jews**. **He**

used rhetorical questions designed to drive home the opposition. The first one took advantage of a “truth” about which **the Jews** were sensitive. **He** asked: **What are these feeble Jews doing? They** knew **they** were not strong or numerous. Humanly speaking, the job was more than **they** should have undertaken. **Sanballat** then asked: **Will they fortify themselves? He** wanted to instill doubts about the wisdom of the project. **They** were fools, **he** chided, wasting effort on a hopeless project. The third rhetorical question: **Will they offer sacrifices? He** ridiculed **their** “pretend” trust in **God**. Did **they** really think that prayer and **sacrifice** would **build** that **wall**? How foolish! His final question: **Will they finish in a day? Can they revive the stones from the heaps of rubble that are burnt (Nehemiah 4:2)? He** used wrong information to discourage **the builders**. Most of **the stones** were still in good condition. **They** had not all disintegrated from the fire as **he** suggested. Psychological warfare can use truths to which people are sensitive or half-truths or falsehoods to intimidate the enemy.²³⁵

Tobiah echoed **Sanballat’s** first argument and then became sarcastic. **Then Tobiah the Ammonite, who was beside him,** said mockingly: **Even if a fox climbed on what they are building, it would break down their stone wall (Nehemiah 4:3)!** First of all, **they** weren’t building it, and second of all, it wasn’t **their wall**. **YHVH** wanted **the wall** built, and **He** happened to use **Nehemiah** as the construction superintendent. Let’s call it what it is: spiritual warfare.

Nehemiah’s first response to the danger and opposition was to bow down before **ADONAI** in prayer: **Hear, our God, for we are despised.** The use of **we** showed **Nehemiah’s** identification with **the people**; **he** faced the same dangers and sacrifices, and confronted the same tests of faith as everyone else. **Turn their insults back on their own head! Give them up as plunder in a land of captivity. Do not cover their guilt or blot out their sin from before You, for they have provoked You to anger before the builders (Nehemiah 4:4-5).** This is the fourth of twelve **prayers** recorded in **Nehemiah (9:5ff, 1:5-11, 2:4, here, 4:9, 5:19, 6:9, 6:14, 13:14, 13:22, 13:29, 13:31).**

Nehemiah’s prayer has much in common with imprecations (those that invoke judgment, calamity, or curses, upon one’s enemies or those perceived as the enemies of **God**) in **the Psalms** and in **Jeremiah**. **He** was outraged at the conduct of **the critics** and **he** said some very rash things . . . in the privacy and security of **his** prayer closet. Three points need to be made about this. First, **Nehemiah’s** request, like imprecations elsewhere, was for divine judgment against sin, a clear teaching of the Bible. This prayer for **God** not to cover their enemies’ guilt was not a

prayer against their salvation but for divine justice. Secondly, it was a prayer for **Ha'Shem** to act, not for permission to take personal revenge (**Romans 12:19-210**). And third, it expressed zeal for **God's** work and **God's** honor. **Nehemiah** had no doubts that **the building of the wall** was the work of **ADONAI**, so opposing it was opposing **God**.²³⁶



So, we rebuilt the wall. The faith, unity, and energy of the small group prevailed. **And the entire wall was joined together up to half its height, meaning that at this point their task was half complete, for the people had a heart to work (Nehemiah 4:6).** The people had been enthusiastic and eager to participate during the early phases of **the building** project. All the ridicule and attacks against **them** had only strengthened **their** resolve. **They** had divided the work among **themselves** and been excited to see the progress as **the wall** came together. **Excavations have revealed that the ancient wall must have had a height of two hundred feet. This showed that the people made remarkable progress.** It is during such times in our own lives that determination becomes important in obeying and completing **the Lord's** work, for distractions and discouragement will multiply as our enthusiasm dissipates.

That productivity should have discouraged the enemies of **God**, but that wasn't the case. In fact, the size of the opposition grew. **When Samaritans** under **Sanballat** (in the north), **the Arabians**, the countrymen of **Geshem**, (in the south), **the Ammonites**, whom **Tobiah** belonged, (to the east), and **the people of Ashdod** (to the west), **heard that restoration of the walls of Jerusalem was proceeding and that the breaches had begun to be closed, they became extremely angry** because **they** realized that **their** ridicule had not succeeded in stopping the work on **the wall (Nehemiah 4:7)**. Under normal circumstances **they** would not have cooperated, but what drew **them** together was a mutual hatred of **ADONAI** and **His people**.

They intensified the opposition and **all conspired together to come and fight against Jerusalem**. How much of this was mere talk is hard to be sure. The failure of this impressive group to strike a single blow suggests **the king's letters** (see **Bw - The Response of King Artakh'shasta**) had **them** stop and think more carefully about what might happen if **they** actually attacked **the Jews**. Did **they** really want to end up fighting the entire Persian army? But their plotting, however half-hearted, clearly included potential raids had to be taken seriously.²³⁷

Initially, **they** merely pretended to care about **the king's** taxes and national security. Then **they** acted as if **the Jews** couldn't **build** anything that would last, but in the end, just like today, **they** were only **angry** that **the Jews** could defend **themselves**. The enemies of **God** didn't care what **the Jews** believed. **They** simply wanted to stop the progress being made on **rebuilding the wall**. So, **they stirred up trouble (Nehemiah 4:8)**.²³⁸

What did **Nehemiah** do when confronted with continued harassment? **But we prayed to our God and stationed guards** at the most conspicuous and vulnerable places on **the wall day and night (Nehemiah 4:9)**. This is the fifth of twelve **prayers** recorded in **Nehemiah (9:5ff, 1:5-11, 2:4, 4:4, here, 5:19, 6:9, 6:14, 13:14, 13:22, 13:29, 13:31)**. **Nehemiah's** response was clear: **prayer** and precaution, trust and good management. **He** had faith in **ADONAI**, but **he** was also aware of the dangers and took the necessary precautions. **They needed to defend the City while the men were occupied with the work as well as at night when a surprise attack might be made**.

The enemies of **YHVH** then resorted to threats of **murder**, and **the Israelites** began to grow weary and discouraged. **Some** began to buckle under the strain. **Meanwhile the people of Judah**, speaking through **their** representatives, said: **The strength of the laborers is failing. There is so much rubble that we are unable to rebuild the wall (Nehemiah 4:10)**. **The Jew's** initial enthusiasm had worn off and fatigue was setting in. This was the critical point in **Nehemiah's** administration, for the enemy's attacks were beginning to have their desired effect of halting the work. **Nehemiah** needed to take steps to renew the people's enthusiasm for the building project to be a success.

Our adversaries are **also** saying: **They will not know or perceive anything, until we come among them and kill them, and put an end to the work (Nehemiah 4:11)**. Part of the strategy of the enemy coalition was to frighten and intimidate **the Jews** by making **them** think an army would surprise them with a

massive force that would engulf **them**. **God's** enemies will stop at nothing, even mass murder, in hopes of preventing the fulfillment of **His** plans. This is a futile hope; however, as nothing can prevent **God's** plans from coming to pass. The destruction of **His** enemy's plan will come on their own heads. **Whoever digs a pit will fall into it, whoever rolls a stone - it will come back upon him (Proverbs 26:27).**²³⁹

So, it happened that the Jews living near them came and told us ten times over, meaning repeatedly (see **Genesis 31:41** for the idiom), **"Wherever you turn, they will attack us"** (**Nehemiah 4:12**). Apparently **Sanballat, Tobiah,** and **Geshem** were spreading rumors of attack to dishearten **the people**. Whether **the** neighboring **Jews** acted as unwitting carriers of propaganda or as useful informants is difficult to tell.²⁴⁰

Nehemiah, however, took definite action. **So, in view of possible danger, I stationed people in the lower places behind the wall in the exposed places. I stationed the people by families with their swords, spears and bows, to be used according to their distance from the enemy (Nehemiah 4:13). Because they were stationed with their families, they would be more motivated to fight.** **Nehemiah's** leadership had robbed **the conspirators** of any initiative **they** might have had. Intimidation had failed, and surprise was now out of the question.²⁴¹

This project involved a tremendous amount of organizational skill on the part of **Nehemiah**. Arranging the workers in groups over forty teams at various preassigned location was a task requiring military precision. It is one of the features that we admire about **Nehemiah: his** ability to delegate and motivate over forty groups, even after they encountered very real threats of harassment and even death. **David** would say: **Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of ADONAI our God (Psalm 20:7).** However, that did not lead **Nehemiah** to conclude that **the Israelites** could meet the enemy's threats armed merely with a scroll of the Torah!²⁴²

Nehemiah called **the people** together, which had the effect of showing **their** strength and giving **him** an opportunity to encourage them by emphasizing **God's** great delivering power. **When I looked things over, I rose up and said to the nobles, the rulers and the rest of the people, "Do not be afraid of them. Remember the great and awesome God, and fight on behalf of your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes"**



(Nehemiah 4:14). The words of **Nehemiah**, “**Do not be afraid,**” reminds us of the reassurance and victory of other leaders in the Bible (**Exodus 14:13; Numbers 14:9; Deuteronomy 20:3 and 31:6; Joshua 10:25**).

The temporary lull was merely a chance to continue **the rebuilding**. **Now when our enemies heard that their plan to attack was known to us, and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to his work (Nehemiah 4:15).** This showed the results of **Nehemiah’s** prayer and leadership. **Thanks to divine intervention, the enemy abandoned the attempt to stop the work by force. Nehemiah** never lost sight of the fact that **God** was in control of all events. The plot was not foiled because **the Jews** had learned about it, nor because of **their** readiness to fight back, but because **ADONAI** prevented it.

Zerubbabel, Ezra and **Nehemiah** all faced determined opposition from powerful foes. They understood that life is filled with spiritual battles, for the enemy of our souls continuously strives to hinder the work of **God**. These men expected opposition to **ADONAI’s** great project of **rebuilding Jerusalem**, and they were not caught off guard when it came. We must not assume every hardship, opposition, or obstacle is an indication that we are acting according to **YHVH’s** will. **God** does use practical hindrances at times to force us to recognize when we are not going in the right direction.

Consider Balaam, for example, a pagan medium who practiced sorcery and other wicked acts for profit. He had been offered a great sum of money to cast a curse on **the LORD’s** people after their exodus from Egypt, but **Ha’Shem** had warned him: **Do not go with them! Do not curse them, for they are blessed (Numbers 22:12)!** Nevertheless, Balaam saddled his donkey and headed out – ostensibly to bless **God’s people**, yet in disobedience to **His** command. As he traveled along, **the LORD** sent an angel to hinder his donkey’s progress. **He** even caused the donkey to speak (who showed more wisdom than his foolish master) in order to warn Balaam that he was going the wrong way.

When we do **ADONAI’s** work, we will face spiritual opposition from the enemies of **God’s** people, and we must expect it. But when there’s any doubt, we shouldn’t assume that opposition is a “green light” on our actions. Rather, we must turn immediately to **Ha’Shem** in prayer and meditate on **His** Word. **YHVH** never commands **His people** to do anything contrary to the principles of Scripture, and **He** might be using obstacles to open our eyes to a wrong decision.²⁴³