

Nehemiah 4-5 – Chapter Study

INTRODUCTION

I. FIRST TERM AS GOVERNOR Chs. 1-12

A. Return & Reconstruction Chs. 1-7

1. Return to Jerusalem Chs. 1-2

2. Rebuilding the walls Chs. 3-7

a. the work delegated Ch. 3

Let's set the scene for our study tonight.

Have already covered the first 3 chapters and will pick it up in ch. 4.

We are learning about that period of Israel's history known as the **Return from Exile**.

Let me give a quick thumbnail sketch of Israel's history . . .

Exodus → Conquest → Tribes & Judges → Kingdom → Divided kingdoms →
Israel exiled → Judah exiled → Return & Rebuild

Nehemiah, trusted advisor to Persian king.

Granted permission to return to Jerusalem to rebuild city walls & restore its fortunes.

Arrived, surveyed, made plan; gathered leaders & shared vision.

Work commenced.

Ch. 3 – everyone worked!

Something beyond the usual took hold; excitement, sense of being a part of something bigger than them; something real, lasting – something that pleased God.

They were in the center of God's will & knew it.

Might guess what came next → Opposition!

It was inevitable that problems would arise.

The devil isn't happy about God's people making spiritual progress so he does his best to resist it.

Following God means dealing with trouble.

John 16:33 - These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

When you set yourself to follow God, the enemy will come around and throw all kinds of stuff at you to try & get you to back off. Get ready for it.

Tozer – the wind in your face.

b. the enemy attacks Ch. 4

¹ But it so happened, when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, that he was furious and very indignant, and mocked the Jews.

We've already heard about 3 guys who were dead set against the rebuilding of Jerusalem.

Sanballat was the governor of Samaria just north of Judah.

His buddy Tobiah was the governor of Ammon on Judah's eastern border. And their cohort in crime was Geshem who ruled over a confederation of nomadic Arab tribes who wandered all over the place. Sanballat was their leader because he ruled over the most prosperous region of the

3. The Samaritans, Ammonites & Arabs had a long running feud with Judah. Under the reigns of David & Solomon, Israel had ruled over their lands & they never forgot it.

They feared Judah's resurgence since it might threaten their security, so they opposed Nehemiah's efforts to rebuild the city walls.

Historically we know that at this period, the Persians had loosened their control of these western provinces and granted the regional governors more authority.

As a result, tensions had risen among neighboring provinces as they began to use their new authority in trying to dominate one another.

Sanballat saw Nehemiah's program of rebuilding as a threat to the control over Judah he'd been able to maintain until then. He was ticked! Infuriated!

His anger came out in mocking what the Jews were doing.

2 And he spoke before his brethren

Fellow officials of Samaria

and the army of Samaria,

Not the entire army but its generals.

and said, "What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they fortify themselves? Will they offer sacrifices?

Meaning offerings of thanksgiving for having rebuilt their walls.

Will they complete it in a day?

Reports of the frenetic pace of the building had come to him.

Will they revive the stones from the heaps of rubbish—stones that are burned?"

The ruined condition of Jerusalem was well known.

In Nehemiah's original tour of the ruins as he surveyed the work that needed to be done, there were some places where the rubbish & debris was so massive, he had to dismount from his horse and go by foot.

The stone used in Israel's walls was limestone.

When limestone is burned, it cracks and loses its integrity, becoming brittle.

Any building they did with burnt stones would be less than optimal.

3 Now Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, "Whatever they build, if even a fox goes up on it, he will break down their stone wall."

Tobiah hears Sanballat's mocking and joins in, adding his own derisive remarks.

Jerusalem's rebuilt wall is such a joke it couldn't support the weight of a rodent, let alone repel an attack.

These guys attack the work of God by mocking & insults.

They knew if they staged an overt military attack, it would have pulled their Persian masters into it.

They wanted to avoid that at all costs, so they resorted to mocking & veiled

threats.

Mocking, scoffing, & bitter sarcasm are a favorite pastime for a lot of people, specially guys.

Guys will sit around together at a restaurant, in the break room at work, or on the construction site eating lunch – and they'll start in on some topic, just hammering away with insults on someone or something they don't like.

Usually, it's all for fun & there's plenty of laughter as each guy tries to out do the others in coming up with a witty slam.

The problem is, by simple repetition of that kind of thing, it becomes the mode they begin to live in; mocking and scoffing at everything, most especially toward all forms of authority.

In Psalm 1 we read this –

1 Blessed is the man Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, Nor stands in the path of sinners, Nor sits in the seat of the scornful;

2 But his delight is in the law of the LORD, And in His law he meditates day and night.

Be careful of how much time you spend with those who are forever mocking and heaping insults and are generally negative about everything.

Be on guard about how their example may be influencing your outlook.

In contrast to hanging out with the scornful who deride everything, in

Philippians 4:8 Paul says –

Whatever things are true, noble, just, pure, lovely, of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—fill your mind with these things.

You might want to consider what Paul says here as it relates to how much time you give to listening to Bill O-Reilly, Glenn Beck, Sean Hannity too!

Watch Nehemiah's response to this verbal assault -

4 Hear, O our God, for we are despised; turn their reproach on their own heads, and give them as plunder to a land of captivity! 5 Do not cover their iniquity, and do not let their sin be blotted out from before You; for they have provoked You to anger before the builders.

Nehemiah's first reaction was to pray.

He didn't get into a battle of wits & zingers with these guys. He talked to God.

The tone of Nehemiah's prayer is interesting. He's not exactly gracious here, is he?

“God, listen to these guys & answer them according to their evil.”

Is this the way we ought to pray for our enemies?

It's not the example Jesus set for us. He prayed from the cross for the forgiveness of those who nailed him to it.

Why then does then incredibly godly man Nehemiah pray this kind of, what is known as an imprecatory prayer?

First – Nehemiah knew with total confidence that rebuilding Jerusalem was God's will.

Sanballat & Tobiah's opposition was contrary to God's will.

These were men who had shown a settled disposition to curse Israel.

And Nehemiah knew well God's promise to Abraham about Israel; I will bless

those who bless you and curse those who curse you.
What he's doing in his prayer here is simply to unite himself with God's heart & promise.

Second – Don't forget that there's another prominent layer to the Book of Nehemiah; it's a powerful picture of the Holy Spirit remaking us into the image of Christ.

Nehemiah = Comfort of Yahweh; Jesus called the Holy Spirit the Comforter.

As we saw in our last study, the walls & gates of Jerusalem speak of the personality and identity of the believer.

Sanballat and his home-boys represent Satan and the demons who oppose and resist the Holy Spirit's work in God's people.

In Nehemiah's response here we see how we're to deal with demonic opposition to our spiritual progress → *Prayer!*

And his reaction reminds us there's no response we can give to our spiritual adversaries than hostility.

There will never be reconciliation with the devil.

We can & ought to pray as Nehemiah does here as it relates to the enemy; "Lord, turn back the devil's schemes on himself."

6 So we built the wall, and the entire wall was joined together up to half its height, for the people had a mind to work.

Half-way done is often the most dangerous point.

Because the *novelty* of the project is over.

Enthusiasm for the work is spent.

And *fatigue* sets in – yet the work required to *complete* the task is the same again as has already been applied & that work has to be done w/o the enthusiasm or same level of strength.

The work just appears as duty, hard labor.

What was fun & rewarding is now a dreary chore.

Up to this point, the people had been motivated to work, but now that motivation faltered.

Half-way is the dangerous point because it's human nature to get to this place & say, "That's good enough."

But a half-way wall isn't good enough; truth be told, it's good for nothing!

What good is it to enter a marathon & drop out after 13 miles?

What good is it to build a house & quite once the framing is finished?

As ridiculous as half-way is in those terms, many believers have made the mistake of thinking going half way with God is good enough.

When they first come to faith, everything is new & exciting & they grow crazy in so many areas.

The Spirit makes big changes & they put away a lot of the world & flesh.

They start looking & sounding like a good, safe Christian.

Inwardly, they know there's still a lot of work to do, with pride, fear, & selfishness, but because things look good on the exterior & go to church instead of the club or bar, they think they've gone far enough.

Besides, dealing with self is so messy. Getting off the pride-ride is so hard.

Conquering fear by stepping out in faith so tedious.

The enemy is right there, waiting for the moment when a believer says to the Holy Spirit beckoning them to a deeper walk, “No, this is far enough. I’ve got all of God I want right now.”

That is an opening for the devil to step in & destroy.

Never, ever say “No” to God. Never resist the call of the Spirit to more of God. Every saint who’s walked with God will tell you from experience—if you aren’t growing in grace, you’re losing it, moving backward, slipping, drifting. Jesus is not just an *Alpha male*. He’s the Alpha & Omega, the Beginning & the End.

Being conformed to His image means that we’ll follow thru & complete that which God sets before us.

7 Now it happened, when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites heard that the walls of Jerusalem were being restored and the gaps were beginning to be closed, that they became very angry, ⁸ and all of them conspired together to come and attack Jerusalem and create confusion.

Ashdod was a major city on the western coast that used to be one of the main centers of the Philistines, another ancient enemy of Israel.

The people listed here form a circle around Judah.

The people of God are hedged in by their enemies.

Despite their attempts to thwart the construction through insults & intimidation, the wall of Jerusalem went up quickly.

When they realized mere words weren’t enough, they met to conspire what other action to take.

They decided to stage an attack aimed at creating confusion.

How would they do that? Well –

They could cause unrest among & between the workers.

After all, the *unifying excitement & vision* that had fueled the first half of the work was spent.

[Application]

They could create confusion by enticing the leaders to do something stupid and so cause a breach of trust & credibility. [Application]

They could harass the workers outright and so cause them to doubt God’s power & love. [Application]

How did Nehemiah respond to the adversary’s plans?

9 Nevertheless we made our prayer to our God, and because of them we set a watch against them day and night.

Nehemiah’s response was both spiritual & practical; they prayed and prepared.

Both were needed.

Prayer that doesn’t lead to action commensurate with it isn’t *sincere*.

And action *without* prayer is *presumption*.

Knowing the enemy was planning an assault, Nehemiah called for a tireless watch to be set.

And so must we. 1 Peter 5:8 says –

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.

¹⁰ Then Judah said, “The strength of the laborers is failing, and *there is* so much rubbish that we are not able to build the wall.” ¹¹ And our adversaries said, “They will neither know nor see anything, till we come into their midst and kill them and cause the work to cease.” ¹² So it was, when the Jews who dwelt near them came, that they told us ten times, “From whatever place you turn, *they will be* upon us.” ¹³ Therefore I positioned *men* behind the lower parts of the wall, at the openings; and I set the people according to their families, with their swords, their spears, and their bows. ¹⁴ And I looked, and arose and said to the nobles, to the leaders, and to the rest of the people, “Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, great and awesome, and fight for your brethren, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses.”

This is my text for Sunday so I'll leave it for then.

¹⁵ And it happened, when our enemies heard that it was known to us, and *that* God had brought their plot to nothing, that all of us returned to the wall, everyone to his work. ¹⁶ So it was, from that time on, *that* half of my servants worked at construction, while the other half held the spears, the shields, the bows, and *wore* armor; and the leaders *were* behind all the house of Judah. ¹⁷ Those who built on the wall, and those who carried burdens, loaded themselves so that with one hand they worked at construction, and with the other held a weapon. Building & battling. These were the original Seabees. The Seabee motto is, “We build. We fight.”

How many of you know the Christian life is a struggle, a fight?

This idea that being a Christian is a crutch for weak people is just plain silly.

I watched Richard Dawkins in an interview wrinkle up his nose in disgust as he expressed his loathing of people who believe in God as weak and unworthy of even being called human beings.

The only person who thinks following Christ is a crutch is the one whose never walked a step in faith.

The Christian life is SOOOO hard – the only way to do it is if God empowers us to do so.

And fully HALF of the walk of faith is a fight, a struggle with dark, demonic forces.

Being a follower of Christ means adopting something of a *militant* mindset.

We're into the REAL UFC = Ultimate Fighting Championship.

We're big fans of the Ultimate Fighter = JESUS! [More Sunday]

¹⁸ Every one of the builders had his sword girded at his side as he built. And the one who sounded the trumpet was beside me. ¹⁹ Then I said to the nobles, the rulers, and the rest of the people, “The work *is* great and extensive, and we are separated far from one another on the wall. ²⁰ Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us.”

The trumpet would sound the alarm at whatever point the enemy attacked.

Then everyone could rally to that point and do battle.

While Nehemiah implemented a solid and simple plan to deal with an attack – he reminded the people that ultimately, their safety lay not in their skill with arms but in the power & favor of God.

Psalm 127:1 - Unless the LORD builds the house, They labor in vain who build it; // Unless the LORD guards the city, The watchman stays awake in vain.

21 So we labored in the work, and half of *the men* held the spears from daybreak until the stars appeared. 22 At the same time I also said to the people, “Let each man and his servant stay at night in Jerusalem, that they may be our guard by night and a working party by day.”

There were many workers who didn't live in Jerusalem but who came to work on the walls.

They stayed in the city during the project.

23 So neither I, my brethren, my servants, nor the men of the guard who followed me took off our clothes, except that everyone took them off for washing.

Other activities were suspended during this time as all effort was focused on rebuilding the walls & gates.

It was this total preoccupation with building that gave rise to some problems as the next verses show.

c. internal turmoil Ch. 5:1-13

1 And there was a great outcry of the people and their wives against their Jewish brethren. 2 For there were those who said, “We, our sons, and our daughters are many; therefore let us get grain, that we may eat and live.” 3 There were also *some* who said, “We have mortgaged our lands and vineyards and houses, that we might buy grain because of the famine.” 4 There were also those who said, “We have borrowed money for the king's tax *on* our lands and vineyards. 5 Yet now our flesh *is* as the flesh of our brethren, our children as their children; and indeed we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and *some* of our daughters have been brought into slavery. *It is not in our power to redeem them, for other men have our lands and vineyards.*”

Working on the walls of Jerusalem meant the people weren't working their fields which was their source of income.

The cost of living in Judah as so steep people had to work long hours, every day to make ends meet.

If it was a poor harvest or something kept them from sowing & reaping it put them behind.

What made things so difficult economically for them was the tribute they had to pay the Persians.

It bled them dry.

So if anyone suffered a setback – they had to borrow money just to pay the tax!
If they were unable to pay their debts, their creditors ceased their lands.
This led to a small group of wealthy Jews who ended up owning most of the land.

Since they were the only ones with any money, they were the only ones offering loans and did so at exorbitant rates, even though usury was forbidden in the Mosaic Law.

Unable to pay their debts, or redeem their lands, some of the Jews had even been forced into selling their own children into slavery to Jewish masters, also forbidden in the Law.

Some of the rich were using the emergency of rebuilding under Nehemiah's leadership to further steal peoples' lands.

6 And I became very angry when I heard their outcry and these words.

7 After serious thought, I rebuked the nobles and rulers, and said to them, "Each of you is exacting usury from his brother." So I called a great assembly against them. 8 And I said to them, "According to our ability we have redeemed our Jewish brethren who were sold to the nations. Now indeed, will you even sell your brethren? Or should they be sold to us?" Then they were silenced and found nothing to say.

Nehemiah & his fellow leaders who'd returned from Persia had used what wealth they'd been able to accumulate to buy the freedom of many of their Jewish brothers & sisters who were slaves to Gentile masters in the captivity.

And now he discovers there were Jewish officials who owned Jewish slaves.

Outrageous!!!!

Both Nehemiah's disgust & their error were so obvious the nobles had nothing to say.

9 Then I said, "What you are doing is not good. Should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies?"

It was precisely this kind of callous disregard for the Law & for God that had resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem.

10 I also, with my brethren and my servants, am lending them money and grain. Please, let us stop this usury! 11 Restore now to them, even this day, their lands, their vineyards, their olive groves, and their houses, also a hundredth of the money and the grain, the new wine and the oil, that you have charged them."

As the Persian appointed governor of Judah, this wasn't a mere suggestion on Nehemiah's part; it was a command.

They were to restore the lands they'd foreclosed on and to give a tax rebate of 1%.

This would still leave them considerable wealth, but it would give the basis for getting wealth back to the people – the land.

12 So they said, "We will restore it, and will require nothing from them; we will do as you say."

Not only would they restore the lands and tax rebate as commanded, they would

leave off any further foreclosures and usury.

Then I called the priests, and required an oath from them that they would do according to this promise.

Nehemiah put the priests in charge of overseeing the implementation of this restoration program to make sure the right people got the right return.

13 Then I shook out the fold of my garment and said, “So may God shake out each man from his house, and from his property, who does not perform this promise. Even thus may he be shaken out and emptied.” And all the assembly said, “Amen!” and praised the LORD. Then the people did according to this promise.

This won't be the end of Nehemiah's problems with these rich nobles.

They comply here but while his reforms endeared him with the common people they moved the rich to begin conspiring against him.

d. Nehemiah's example Ch. 5:14-19

14 Moreover, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the 20th year until the 32nd year of King Artaxerxes, 12 years, neither I nor my brothers ate the governor's provisions. 15 But the former governors who were before me laid burdens on the people, and took from them bread and wine, besides 40 shekels of silver. Yes, even their servants bore rule over the people, but I did not do so, because of the fear of God.

As the Persian royal representative, Nehemiah was assigned & allotted support from the people he governed.

He refused that support because of the burden it would have added to the people.

Nehemiah paid his own way from his own resources saved up during his years as the cupbearer to Artaxerxes.

16 Indeed, I also continued the work on this wall, and we did not buy any land. All my servants were gathered there for the work.

While Nehemiah had to supervise the work on the wall, he was not above getting down in the trenches to do the actual work of slinging stones and hauling off rubble.

17 And at my table were 150 Jews and rulers, besides those who came to us from the nations around us. 18 Now *that* which was prepared daily was one ox *and* 6 choice sheep. Also fowl were prepared for me, and once every 10 days an abundance of all kinds of wine. Yet in spite of this I did not demand the governor's provisions, because the bondage was heavy on this people.

It was the governor's responsibility to house and feed those of his court, besides entertain visiting dignitaries.

Nehemiah paid for the daily provisions of some 150 officials – a *small amount* for a province the size of Judah.

In the ancient world, bragging rights went to the ruler who had a big court.

The bigger the court, the great the fame and glory.

This is where Solomon excelled – he had tens of thousands and each was

allotted not only a place at his sumptuous table but were given lavish uniforms.

150 is a tiny staff for a region like Judah showing Nehemiah's frugality & concern to not burden the people.

How many people work for Ventura County?

Imagine if every one of them was given room & board by one person on the County Board of Supervisors.

That's what Nehemiah did.

He did it for none but God's glory – not a particle for his own fame.

He cared none at all for the world's values or means of attaining honor.

But he wasn't at all reluctant to look to God for it -

19 Remember me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people.

This is an entirely right thing to pray because God is just and rewards His people for their faithfulness.

Paul wrote in 1 Cor. 15:58 –

My beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.