

## **Trouble, Trouble Everywhere**

Nehemiah 4 & 5

### **Progress & challenges**

In the book of Nehemiah, each major step forward in the narrative is marked by a reference to the opposition of Sanballat and his colleagues. Notice that the opposition continues to grow (which now includes the army of Samaria). Previously, Nehemiah ignored them (2:10) and simply dismissed them (2:20); now he devotes significant attention and energy to managing the issues that arise.

Nehemiah begins with prayer (4:4-5). Of course, the form of his prayer rises out of what needs to be said rather than *vice versa*. We find common elements between his prayer and the psalms of lament, especially imprecatory prayers which call down curses upon people (see Psalms 10:15; 35; 58:6-9; 59:5; 69:22-28; 79:12 and 109:6-19). Again, Nehemiah turns the situation over to the Lord. Nehemiah is very efficient and effective in how he allocates his time – he speaks to the Lord about the enemies and he takes action (with the people he is leading) to address the issues. He doesn't waste his breath replying to the enemies. In some ways, these prayers are shocking, but they flow from a spirit that knows it can tell God anything, even if God chooses the route of forgiveness and reconciliation. In these prayers, we should be encouraged to trust God enough to share our deepest pain, anguish, hurt and anger.

The mocking from Sanballat and his allies is having an affect on building the wall. They are halfway done and they are getting tired as the work gets harder (4:10), they are scared of a surprise attack from their enemies (4:11) and those living outside of Jerusalem wanted the workers to return to them, abandoning the wall (4:12).

### **Response to the external threats**

Nehemiah posts armed guards at the lowest points of the wall that was being built. The hope was that, when enemies saw armed men at these exposed sites, they would conclude that more similarly armed forces were stationed at other points along the wall. (4:13)

Significantly, Nehemiah begins 4:14 with the words "I looked these things over" (NRSV). The enemies were wrong when they thought the Jews would not know or see an impending enemy attack (4:11). Nehemiah saw clearly what they were doing. In holy war traditions, when faced with an enemy attack, people would draw up in battle lines according to their tribal families and be told by an official not to fear because God would fight for them and defeat their enemies. Already arranged by families (4:13), the people are told by Nehemiah not to be afraid. He also urges them to think about their great and awesome Lord and to fight united. His actions were enough to convince the enemy that their hostile plans had indeed been discovered.

He takes three concrete actions to provide safety for the builders:

- 1) He appoints half of his loyal troops (4:16, 23; 5:10, 16; 13:19) to work on the wall while the other half of his servants, supplied with nearly the full armor of Persian soldiers and surely better armed than the people described in 4:13, are stationed as guards just behind the whole house of Judah, who were building the wall.
- 2) The basket carriers are given a double task (4:17). With one hand they are to steady their baskets and with the other hand carry a weapon. These are the same basket carriers who had been running out of energy (4:10). What has given them new energy? The builders themselves needed both hands for their work, but they had a short sword strapped on their hips for emergencies (4:18).
- 3) Nehemiah sets up a makeshift warning system in case of enemy attack. The building project is vast and the workers have been distributed over the entire length of the wall. If the enemy were to attack this dispersed group, the trumpeter would sound the alarm and the people would assemble at the danger point.

Nehemiah again reminds them that they are under God's protection, "Our God will fight for us." (4:20) Nehemiah's security measures successfully meet the external and internal threats. The people even put in a longer than usual day—from dawn to the time when the stars came out (instead of from dawn to sunset). He reduces their commute time by having everyone sleep inside Jerusalem.

Leadership lesson: Ongoing leadership is required from beginning to end. Nehemiah isn't satisfied to launch the project and forget it, but stays engaged to see it through. He adapts to the changing circumstances. Good leaders pay attention to the impact that external events have and they take steps to directly address that impact. When you begin a project, do you budget the time and resources to stick with it to completion? Is there work that you are doing with others that require more of your support and encouragement than it is getting?

### **Trouble from within: A Social and Economic Crisis**

The focus on building the wall brought to a head a long-term economic problem where some members of the upper class were oppressive toward those who took out loans. They deprived them of their land and forced their children into labor through a ruthless application of the rules of borrowing. A difficult situation of draught and crop failure (5:3) and the need to pay Persian taxes out of the "surplus" that could be produced from a given field (5:4) became worse as Nehemiah required the builders to stay in Jerusalem during the fifty-two days of wall building. This meant that there was a shortage of labor at harvest time, when farmers normally acquire almost all of their income for the year.

The pain of this crisis was exacerbated by the fact that the creditors were Jewish kin of those who were in debt. Three different groups experienced severe financial difficulties:

- 1) Poor landless farmers complained that they were forced to pledge the labor of their sons and daughters in order to pay for basic food. (5:2)
- 2) Debtors complain that they have had to pledge fields, vineyards, and houses in order to get grain. Pledging real estate may indicate their increased desperation, since land once pledged and lost would be gone forever, whereas children might eventually be redeemed. (5:3)
- 3) Debtors had to borrow silver in order to pay the Persian royal tax, again using their fields and vineyards as collateral. (5:4)

The real issue is not one of charging interest, but of seizing pledges that had been given to back loans. Creditors had seized fields and vineyards. Despite ties of blood and country, creditors forced debtors to put their children into debt slavery and some of their daughters had already been claimed by creditors, to be sexually exploited (see Esther 7:8).

Nehemiah's sharp accusations leave the creditors speechless (5:8), and he urges them to act more justly based upon their fear of (= faith in) God. Strictly speaking, what the creditors were doing was not illegal, but they were using the crisis of the "brothers" to make personal gain.

Nehemiah demands that creditors return to the original owners whatever land had been taken in pledge. He also demands that interest charged be rebated to the borrowers. The creditors immediately agree to Nehemiah's terms.

Nehemiah insisted that this problem involved the whole community, and he calls an assembly against the creditors. He appeals to the creditors' faith ("Should you not walk in the fear of our God?") as well as to their pride ("to prevent the taunts of the nations"). Such fear of God and such compassion might transform potentially ruthless creditors into people who would invest their money for the good and benefit of all.

Nehemiah also set an example. Nehemiah did not insist on his rights. Instead he presented his life to God as a kind of living sacrifice: "Remember for my good all that I have done for this people." He knew that in the end he would be spared only by God's great and steadfast

love (13:22), but he took joy in how God used and shaped him for the good of the entire community.

Leadership lessons: We are all in this together. To live (and love) in community requires a balance between personal interests and community interests. When things get out of balance, it is ultimately the role of those with power to restore a healthy balance. In Nehemiah's case, he was willing to listen to complaints about what had been a long-term (unresolved) problem and he was willing to act upon it, giving himself and holding others accountable to make amends. He also acted quickly, later in Nehemiah he addresses this issue more fully, but he did not wait for the "perfect" solution to take action. Perhaps it was a set of fresh eyes and ears that helped; sometimes we get so used to "just the way things are" that we need a fresh look at what may be an entrenched issue.

Throughout all of the crises in these two chapters, Nehemiah addressed the issues, brought the community together and continued to put the focus on God. When we follow that example in any area of influence, then we can join Nehemiah in prayer, "Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people." (5:19)

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Next Week: 6:1-7:73a "We Have a Wall!"