

CHAPTER 4

We left all hands at work for the building of the wall about Jerusalem. But such good work is not wont to be carried on without opposition; now here we are told what opposition was given to it, and what methods Nehemiah took to forward the work, notwithstanding that opposition.

I. Their enemies reproached and ridiculed their undertaking, but their scoffs they answered with prayers: they heeded them not, but went on with their work notwithstanding (v. 1-6).

II. They formed a bloody design against them, to hinder them by force of arms (v. 7, 8, 10-12). To guard against this Nehemiah prayed (v. 9), set guards (v. 13), and encouraged them to fight (v. 14), by which the design was broken (v. 15), and so the work was carried on with all needful precaution against a surprise (v. 16-23). In all this Nehemiah approved himself a man of great wisdom and courage, as well as great piety.

NEHEMIAH 4:1-6

THE OPPOSITION OF SANBALLAT, ETC.

Here is,

I. The spiteful scornful reflection which Sanballat and Tobiah cast upon the Jews for their attempt to build the wall about Jerusalem. The country rang of it presently; intelligence was brought of it to Samaria, that nest of enemies to the Jews and their prosperity; and here we are told how they received the tidings.

1. In heart. They were very angry at the undertaking, and had *great indignation*, v. 1. It vexed them that Nehemiah came to seek the welfare of the children of Israel (Nehemiah 2:10); but, when they heard of this great undertaking for their good, they were out of all patience. They had hitherto pleased themselves with the thought that while Jerusalem was unwalled they could swallow it up and make themselves masters of it when they pleased; but, if it be walled, it will not only be fenced against them, but

by degrees become formidable to them. The strength and safety of the church are the grief and vexation of its enemies.

2. In word. They despised it, and made it the subject of their ridicule. In this they sufficiently displayed their malice; but good was brought out of it; for, looking upon it as a foolish undertaking that would sink under its own weight, they did not go about to obstruct it till it was too late. Let us see with what pride and malice they set themselves publicly to banter it.

(1.) Sanballat speaks with scorn of the workmen: “*These feeble Jews*” (v. 2), “what will they do for materials? *Will they revive the stones out of the rubbish?* And what mean they by being so hasty? Do they think to make the walling of a city but one day’s work, and to keep the feast of dedication with sacrifice the next day? Poor silly people! See how ridiculous they make themselves!”

(2.) Tobiah speaks with no less scorn of the work itself. He has his jest too, and must show his wit, v. 3. Profane scoffers sharpen one another. “Sorry work,” says he, “they are likely to make of it; they themselves will be ashamed of it: *If a fox go up*, not with his subtlety, but with his weight, he *will break down their stone wall.*” Many a good work has been thus looked upon with contempt by the *proud and haughty scorers*.

II. Nehemiah’s humble and devout address to God when he heard of these reflections. He had notice brought him of what they said. It is probable that they themselves sent him a message to this purport, to discourage him, hoping to jeer him out of his attempt; but he did not answer these fools according to their folly; he did not upbraid them with their weakness, but looked up to God by prayer.

1. He begs of God to take notice of the indignities that were done them (v. 4), and in this we are to imitate him: *Hear, O our God! for we are despised.* Note,

(1.) God’s people have often been a despised people, and loaded with contempt.

(2.) God does, and will, hear all the slights that are put upon his people, and it is their comfort that he does so and a good reason why they should be as though they were deaf, ~~Psalm~~ Psalm 38:13, 15. “Thou art our God to whom we appeal; our cause needs no more than a fair hearing.”

2. He begs of God to avenge their cause and turn the reproach upon the enemies themselves (v. 4, 5); and this was spoken rather by a spirit of prophecy than by a spirit of prayer, and is not to be imitated by us who are taught of Christ to *pray for* those that *despitefully use and persecute us*. Christ himself prayed for those that reproached him: *Father, forgive them*. Nehemiah here prays, *Cover not their iniquity*. Note,

(1.) Those that cast contempt on God's people do but prepare everlasting shame for themselves.

(2.) It is a sin from which sinners are seldom recovered. Doubtless Nehemiah had reason to think the hearts of those sinners were desperately hardened, so that they would never repent of it, else he would not have prayed that it might *never be blotted out*. The reason he gives is not, *They have abused us*, but, *They have provoked thee*, and that *before the builders*, to whom, it is likely, they sent a spiteful message. Note, We should be angry at the malice of persecutors, not because it is abusive to us, but because it is offensive to God; and on that we may ground an expectation that God will appear against it, ^{<197418>}Psalm 74:18, 22.

III. The vigour of the builders, notwithstanding these reflections, v. 6. They made such good speed that in a little time they had run up the wall to half its height, for *the people had a mind to work*; their hearts were upon it, and they would have it forwarded. Note,

1. Good work goes on well when people have a mind to it.

2. The reproaches of enemies should rather quicken us to our duty than drive us from it.

~~<197418>~~ NEHEMIAH 4:7-15

THE OPPOSITION OF SANBALLAT, ETC.

We have here,

I. The conspiracy which the Jews' enemies formed against them, to stay the building by slaying the builders. The conspirators were not only Sanballat and Tobiah, but other neighbouring people whom they had drawn into the plot. They flattered themselves with a fancy that the work would

soon stand still of itself; but, when they heard that it went on a prospered, they were angry at the Jews for being so hasty to push the work forward and angry at themselves for being so slow in opposing it (v. 7): *They were very wrath. Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce, and their wrath, for it was cruel.* Nothing would serve but they would *fight against Jerusalem*, v. 8. Why, what quarrel had they with the Jews? Had they done them any wrong? Or did they design them any? No, they lived peaceably by them; but it was merely out of envy and malice; they hated the Jews' piety, and were therefore vexed at their prosperity and sought their ruin. Observe,

1. How unanimous they were: *They conspired all of them together*, though of different interests among themselves, yet one in their opposition to the work of God.

2. How close they were; they said, "*They shall not know, neither see*, till we have them at our mercy." Thus they took crafty counsel, and digged deep to hide it from the Lord, and promised themselves security and success from the secrecy of their management.

3. How cruel they were: *We will come and slay them*. If nothing less than the murder of the workmen will put a stop to the work, they will not stick at that; nay, it is their blood they thirst for, and they are glad of any pretence to glut themselves with it.

4. What the design was and how confident they were of success: it was to *cause the work to cease* (v. 11), and this they were confident that they should effect. The hindering of good work is that which bad men aim at and promise themselves; but good work is God's work, and it shall prosper.

II. The discouragements which the builders themselves laboured under. At the very time when the adversaries said, Let us *cause the work to cease*, Judah said, "Let us even let it fall, for we are not able to go forward with it," v. 10. They represent the labourers as tired, and the remaining difficulties, even of that first part of their work, the removing of the rubbish, as insuperable, and therefore they think it advisable to desist for the present. Can Judah, that warlike valiant tribe, sneak thus? Active leading men have many times as much ado to grapple with the fears of their friends as with the terrors of their enemies.

III. The information that was brought to Nehemiah of the enemies' designs, v. 12. There were *Jews that dwelt by them*, in the country, who,

though they had not zeal enough to bring them to Jerusalem to help their brethren in building the wall, yet, having by their situation opportunity to discover the enemies' motions, had so much honesty and affection to the cause as to give intelligence of them; nay, that their intelligence might be the more credited, they came themselves to give it, and they said it ten times, repeating it as men in earnest, and under a concern, and the report was confirmed by many witnesses. The intelligence they gave is expressed abruptly, and finds work for the critics to make out the sense of it, which perhaps is designed to intimate that they gave this intelligence as men out of breath and in confusion, whose very looks would make up the deficiencies of their words. I think it may be read, without supplying any thing: "*Whatever place you turn to, they are against us*, so that you have need to be upon your guard on all sides," Note, God has many ways of bringing to light, and so bringing to nought, the devices and designs of his and his church's enemies. Even the cold and feeble Jews that contentedly dwell by them shall be made to serve as spies upon them; nay, rather than fail, *a bird of the air shall carry their voice*.

IV. The pious and prudent methods which Nehemiah, hereupon, took to baffle the design, and to secure his work and workmen.

1. It is said (v. 14) he *looked*.

(1.) He looked up, engaged God for him, and put himself and his cause under the divine protection (v. 9): *We made our prayer unto our God*. That was the way of this good man, and should be our way; all his cares, all his griefs, all his fears, he spread before God, and thereby made himself easy. This was the first thing he did; before he used any means, he made his prayer to God, for with him we must always begin.

(2.) He looked about him. Having prayed, he *set a watch against them*. The instructions Christ has given us in our spiritual warfare agree with this example, ^(4B1)Matthew 26:41. *Watch and pray*. If we think to secure ourselves by prayer only, without watchfulness, we are slothful and tempt God; if by watchfulness, without prayer, we are proud and slight God; and, either way, we forfeit his protection.

2. Observe,

(1.) How he posted the guards, v. 13. *In the lower places* he set them *behind the wall*, that they might annoy the enemy over it, as a breast-work;

but *in the higher places*, where the wall was raised to its full height, he set them upon it, that from the top of it they might throw down stones or darts upon the heads of the assailants: he set them *after their families*, that mutual relation might engage them to mutual assistance.

(2.) How he animated and encouraged the people, v. 14. He observed even the nobles and rulers themselves, as well as the rest of the people, to be in a great consternation upon the intelligence that was brought them, and ready to conclude that they were all undone, by which their hands were weakened both for work and war, and therefore, he endeavours to silence their fears. “Come,” says he, “*be not afraid of them*, but behave yourselves valiantly, considering,

[1.] Whom you fight under. You cannot have a better captain: *Remember the Lord, who is great and terrible*; you think your enemies *great and terrible*, but what are they in comparison with God, especially in opposition to him? He is great above them to control them, and will be terrible to them when he comes to reckon with them.” Those that with an eye of faith see the church's God to be great and terrible will see the church's enemies to be mean and despicable. The reigning fear of God is the best antidote against the ensnaring fear of man. He that is afraid of *a man that shall die forgets the Lord his Maker*, ^{<2512>}Isaiah 51:12, 13.

[2.] “Whom you fight for. You cannot have a better cause; you fight for *your brethren* (^{<3038>}Psalm 122:8), *your sons, and your daughters*. All that is dear to you in their world lies at stake; therefore *behave yourselves valiantly*.”

V. The happy disappointment which this gave to the enemies, v. 15. When they found that their design was discovered, and that the Jews were upon their guard, they concluded that it was to no purpose to attempt any thing, but that *God had brought their counsel to nought*. They knew they could not gain their point but by surprise, and, if their plot was known, it was quashed. The Jews hereupon *returned every one to his work*, with so much the more cheerfulness because they saw plainly that God owned it and owned them in the doing of it. Note, God's care of our safety should engage and encourage us to go on with vigour in our duty. As soon as ever a danger is over let us *return to our work*, and trust God another time.

THE PRECAUTION OF NEHEMIAH

When the builders had so far reason to think the design of the enemies broken *as to return to their work*, yet they were not so secure as to lay down their arms, knowing how restless and unwearied they were in their attempts, and that, if one design failed, they would be hatching another. Thus must we watch always against our spiritual enemies, and not expect that our warfare will be accomplished till our work is. See what course Nehemiah took, that the people might hold themselves in a readiness, in case there should be an attack.

1. While one half were at work, the other half were under their arms, holding *spears, and shields, and bows*, not only for themselves but for the labourers too, who would immediately quit their work, and betake themselves to their weapons, upon the first alarm, v. 16. It is probable that they changed services at stated hours, which would relieve the fatigue of both, and particularly would be an ease to the *bearers of burdens*, whose *strength had decayed* (v. 10); while they held the weapons, they were eased and yet not idle. Thus dividing their time between the trowels and the spears, they are said to *work with one hand* and hold their weapons *with the other* (v. 17), which cannot be understood literally, for the work would require both hands; but it intimates that they were equally employed in both. Thus must we work out our salvation with the weapons of our warfare in our hand; for in every duty we must expect to meet with opposition from our spiritual enemies, against whom we must still be *fighting the good fight of faith*.

2. Every builder had a sword by his side (v. 18), which he could carry without hindering his labour. The word of God is the sword of the Spirit, which we ought to have always at hand and never to seek, both in our labours and in our conflicts as Christians.

3. Care was taken both to get and give early notice of the approach of the enemy, in case they should endeavour to surprise them. Nehemiah kept a trumpeter always by him to sound an alarm, upon the first intimation of danger. The work was large, and the builders were dispersed; for in all parts of the wall they were labouring at the same time. Nehemiah continually walked round to oversee the work and encourage the

workmen, and so would have speedy intelligence if the enemy made an attack, of which, by sound of trumpet, he would soon give notice to all, and they must immediately repair to him with a full assurance that their *God would fight for them*, v. 18-20. When they acted as workmen, it was requisite they should be dispersed wherever there was work to do; but when as soldiers it was requisite they should come into close order, and be found in a body. Thus should the labourers in Christ's building be ready to unite against a common foe.

4. The inhabitants of the villages were ordered to lodge within Jerusalem, with their servants, not only that they might be the nearer to their work in the morning, but that they might be ready to help in case of an attack in the night, v. 22. The strength of a city lies more in its hands than in its walls; secure them, and God's blessing upon them, and be secure.

5. Nehemiah himself, and all his men, kept closely to their business. The spears were held up, with the sight of them to terrify the enemy, not only from sun to sun, but from twilight to twilight every day, v. 21. Thus ought we to be always upon our guard against our spiritual enemies, not only (as here) while *it is light*, but when *it is dark*, for they are the *rulers of the darkness of this world*. Nay, so very intent was Nehemiah upon his work, and so fast did he hold his servants to it, that while the heat of the business lasted neither he himself nor his attendants went into bed, but every night lay and slept in their clothes (v. 23), except that they shifted them now and then, either for cleanliness or in a case of ceremonial pollution. It was a sign that their heart was upon their work when they could not find time to dress and undress, but resolved they would be at all times ready for service. Good work is likely to go on successfully when those that labour in it thus make a business of it.