

Through External Opposition: Prayer

Nehemiah 4:1–6



Week Five

inTro



Read This Week's Passage:
Nehemiah 4:1–6

NEWTON'S THIRD LAW

Every action has an equal and opposite reaction in the realm of physics. But the same occurs in the spiritual realm. When there is movement going forward, there is also friction moving against it. In leadership, any project is bound to undergo opposition before it meets success.

While God's people are rallying behind Nehemiah in chapter 2 and uniting to build the wall in chapter 3, chapter 4 gives us insight into what their enemies were doing. God was not the only One moving—His enemy was too. A coalition had been forming against Nehemiah's initiative. Sanballat, the governor of Samaria (northern region); Tobiah the Ammonite (an eastern region); Geshem the Arabian king (a southern region); and the Ashdodites (west of Israel) created an alliance to surround Jerusalem. Trace the growth of their coalition from Nehemiah 2:10, 19, and 4:7. They could not war openly against Jerusalem because Nehemiah was under the protection of the king. Rather, in Nehemiah 4, they implemented three strategies: ridicule (4:1–3), violence (4:7, 8), and discouragement (4:11, 12).

In this week's study, we find the biblical answer to external forms of opposition: prayer. It sounds like a simple answer, but it really is the ultimate means to overcome any challenge. Instead of letting emotion take over, Nehemiah resorted to prayer. He did not repress his frustrations or express them to others. Instead, he confessed his heart to the Lord and then reassessed his situation. This focus allowed the people to have confidence in their leader and to mimic his restraint and resolve.



inScribe

Write out Nehemiah 4:1–6 from the translation of your choice. If you're pressed for time, write out Nehemiah 4:4–6. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, outline it, or mind map the chapter.



Go back to your scribed text and study the passage.

Circle repeated words/phrases/ideas

Underline words/phrases that are important and have meaning to you



Draw **Arrows** to connect words/phrases to other associated or related words/phrases



Memorize your favorite verse. Write it out multiple times to help memorization.

What insecurities do you struggle with? How do your insecurities impact your family? How can Christ help you overcome your insecurities?



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A COALITION OF CRITICS

Why were there opponents to Nehemiah? It happens to be a part of sinful human nature that the promotion and fruition of the other threaten the interests of the self. In Nehemiah's case, it was simple geopolitical economics. Centered between the Tigris and Euphrates River valley city-states and the Nile-centered Egyptian economy, a stable Jerusalem ensured trade potential and secure commercial enterprise. In turn, this would downplay Samaria's role in the region, having repercussions for her allies as well. Insecurity usually leads to a "whatever benefits the other threatens me" kind of thinking.

Have you met people like this? Or perhaps you have felt this way yourself? When people hear about a promotion, an award, or some acknowledgment of another, their insecurity can lead to scorn, sarcasm, sneering, and insult. "You know, she only got that award because . . ." Or, "the position needed to be filled immediately, so they gave it to you temporarily until . . ." Mixed with passive aggression, jealousy, and/or all sorts of toxic thinking, self seeks to preserve its dignity at the expense of downplaying the other.

Sanballat resorts to ridicule as his first attack. Scripture states, "He was furious and very indignant, and mocked the Jews" (Nehemiah 4:1, NKJV). Then, Sanballat "spoke before his brethren and the army of Samaria" (verse 2, NKJV). Rather than addressing Nehemiah, the teasing takes place outside his hearing range. The established Samaritan army was so anxious about their future that their leaders mocked Jerusalem behind their back. So intense was their mockery that Scripture records the frivolous soundbites of the sidekick, Tobiah, about a fox (verse 3).

The insults fall into the following categories: "these feeble Jews" (mocking identity and culture); "will they fortify themselves?" (mocking ability); "will they offer sacrifices?" (mocking religion and conviction); "will they complete it in a day?" (mocking experience); "will they revive the stones from the heaps of rubbish . . .?" (mocking knowledge and education); and "if even a fox goes up on it" (mocking quality; verses 2, 3, NKJV).

As it is with the nature of these comments, they manage to spread and eventually migrate to Sanballat's intended audience. Scripture does not specifically state who is praying, but the context is clear that it is Nehemiah who prayed in verses 4 and 5. It is almost as if he was so impatient to pray that he did not even have enough time to write, "and I prayed." Rather, his reaction was the immediate prayer itself.

WHAT'S IN YOUR MUG?

Every individual has a set of beliefs about themselves that they hold dear. It is part of the self-identity grounded in a variety of different fields. As mentioned before, Sanballat attacked Nehemiah's identity and culture, ability, religion and conviction, experience, knowledge and education, and quality of work, hoping to get some reaction out of him. As the anecdote goes, if someone were to stumble into you while you were holding a full mug, what would spill out? This is the ultimate goal of the intimidators—they want to “expose” what they assume will be your negative emotions. Sanballat was petrified and irate about the wall project, and through his attacks, he attempted to push Nehemiah into spilling those same emotions.

But what spills out of Nehemiah? He is not perturbed by the personal attacks. In place of reactionary retaliation, self-justification, or denial, he instead finds a conduit for his emotional response through prayer (Nehemiah 4:4, 5). Instead of justifying his years of experience as a courtier or legal documentation, what immediately spills out is his concern for the glory of God.

Imprecatory prayers, those that curse others, can be difficult to explain, especially in the light of Jesus' teachings. But they are found in Scripture, especially in the writings of David, a man after God's own heart (Psalms 5:10; 10:15; 28:4; 31:17, 18; 35:4–6; 40:14, 15; 58:6–11; 69:22–28; 109:6–15; 139:19–22; 140:9, 10). In these passages, the emotion that drives the prayer is not anger and self-justification. Instead, the praying makes the pray-er so identify with God and His work that they forget themselves. In Nehemiah's case, the project was so much more than the insults of Sanballat, the walls of Jerusalem, or the geopolitical dynamics of that time. There were universal and salvific repercussions to it, and Nehemiah knew where he stood in salvation history. In prayer, he was at one with God, seeking to remove any deterrent to the plan of salvation.

Christians fluctuate from being confidently presumptuous in God's ability, discounting trials and tribulations altogether as petty, to being anxiously nervous, thinking that the entire plan of salvation is dependent on us! Both can appear to be zealous and faithful, but both are selfish and even negate the sacrifice of Christ on the cross! Instead of egotistically weighing our role and the capability of the opposition, it is the simple relationship with the Lord and being in the middle of His will through prayer that enables us to have the victory. When Nehemiah was stumbled into, it was this relationship that was concerned for God's glory that spilled out.



inTerpret

After looking at your scribed and annotated text, what special insights do your marks overall seem to point to?



What questions emerge after studying this passage? What parts are difficult?

What other principles and conclusions do you find?



Read more at
www.inverseible.org/neh5-4

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What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Prov. 16:32

Rom. 8:31

2 Cor. 12:9



What other verses/promises come to mind in connection with Nehemiah 4:1-6?

Review your memorized verse from Nehemiah 4:1-6.

CHRISTUS VICTOR

The term hippie is derived from a countercultural movement that started in North America in the 1960s and eventually influenced the whole globe. This movement emphasized freedom, open love—which fueled the sexual revolution—and an antiestablishment liberality. With slogans like “flower power” and “make love, not war,” its approach to religion was nothing new, but it de-emphasized particulars and stressed all things positive. Contemporary renditions of the movement include the New Age movement, bohemians, and other “spiritual, but not religious” ideologies. They claim to have the innate exegetical ability to distinguish that which is positive and core from that which is negative and superfluous. Many consider Jesus to have taught free love and spiritual freedom from negative “vibes.”

Yes, He had a beard, and the paintings have Him with the iconic long hair and “sash.” But those things do not make Jesus a hippie. We need to view Christ from a biblical lens—from His own teachings. Though Jesus was the embodiment of love and taught all things positive, there are some things that are striking.

For example, John 15:18–25 has our Lord saying some sharp words, “If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. . . He who hates Me hates My Father also. If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would have no sin; but now they have seen and also hated both Me and My Father. But this happened that the word might be fulfilled which is written in their law, ‘They hated Me without a cause’ ” (NKJV). The passage ends with Christ quoting from an imprecatory prayer from David. It’s not that Jesus is bitter and desiring to curse His enemies. Rather Jesus came and drew sharp lines between the world and heaven (Matthew 10:34). He taught and lived out the principles of the kingdom of heaven fully knowing that many would hate Him and these principles. He had, does, and will have enemies. But it’s clear that “we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12, NKJV). He is the Victor in a larger spiritual war (Revelation 14 :7–12).

It was not holy escapism that Christ taught or superficially saccharine spirituality. Jesus fought and continues to fight as our Warrior-King, pursuing the salvation of souls and ultimately desirous to eliminate our carnal natures (Romans 6:4–9) for the conversion of the worldly to the spiritual. This implies passion, zeal, fortitude, passion, and a certain intensity that can be explained only in the context of this sinful world, the holiness of heaven, and the righteousness of Christ.



inVite

Meditate on Nehemiah 4:1–6 again and look for Jesus in the passage.



Are you comfortable with the concept of Jesus punishing the wicked?

How do you see Jesus differently or see Him again?

Prayer: How do you respond to seeing Jesus in this way?



Read more at
www.inverseible.org/neh5-6

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Review your memory verse.
How does it apply to your
life this week?

—————→
As you have studied this
week, what personal
applications have you been
convicted of in your life?

What are practical applications
you must make in your school,
family, workplace, and church?



Read more inSight from the
Spirit of Prophecy at
www.inverseible.org/neh5-7

DERISION AND DISCOURAGEMENT

“Those who were restoring the defenses of Jerusalem did not go forward in their work unmolested. Satan was busy in stirring up opposition and creating discouragement. The principal agents in this movement were Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arabian. These idolaters had exulted in the feeble and defenseless condition of the Jews, and had mocked at their religion, and ridiculed their devastated city. And when the work of rebuilding the wall was entered upon, they, with envenomed zeal, set themselves to hinder the undertaking. To accomplish this, they attempted to cause division among the workmen by suggesting doubts and arousing unbelief as to their success. They also ridiculed the efforts of the builders, declared the enterprise an impossibility, and predicted a disgraceful failure. . . .

“The builders on the wall were soon beset by more active opposition. They were compelled to guard continually against the plots of their sleepless adversaries. The emissaries of the enemy endeavored to destroy their courage by the circulation of false reports; conspiracies were formed on various pretexts to draw Nehemiah into their toils; and false-hearted Jews were found ready to aid the treacherous undertaking. Again, the report was spread that Nehemiah was plotting rebellion against the Persian monarch, intending to exalt himself as king over Israel, and that all who aided him were traitors.

“Emissaries of the enemy, professing friendliness, mingled with the builders, suggesting changes in the plan, seeking in various ways to divert the attention of the workers, to cause confusion and perplexity, and to arouse distrust and suspicion. And the plans formed for the advancement of the work were reported, by these spies, to the enemy, and thus they were enabled to labor with greater effect to thwart the purpose of the builders. . . .

“The experience of Nehemiah is repeated in the history of God’s people in this time. Those who labor in the cause of truth will find that they cannot do this without exciting the anger of its enemies. Though they have been called of God to the work in which they are engaged, and their course is approved of him, they can not escape reproach and derision. They will be denounced as visionary, unreliable, scheming, hypocritical,—anything, in short, that will suit the purpose of their enemies. The most sacred things will be represented in a ridiculous light to amuse the ungodly. A very small amount of sarcasm and low wit, united with envy, jealousy, impiety, and hatred, is sufficient to excite the mirth of the profane scoffer. And these presumptuous jesters sharpen one another’s ingenuity, and embolden each other in their blasphemous work. Contempt and derision are indeed painful to human nature; but they must be endured by all who are true to God. It is the policy of Satan thus to turn souls from doing the work which the Lord has laid upon them.

“Proud scorers are not to be trusted; yet, as Satan found in the heavenly courts a company to sympathize with him, so these find among professed followers of Christ those whom they can influence, who believe them honest, who sympathize with them, plead in their behalf, and become permeated with their spirit.”¹

1. (Ellen G. White, “Derision and Discouragement,” *Southern Watchman*, April 12, 1904.)



Share insights from this week's memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.



Have you ever been personally attacked?

How have you dealt with similar social and/or spiritual situations in the past? Which party were you?

Can things go wrong for people who live right? If so, what can we say to give them comfort and courage?

What are the tools of the devil mentioned in this chapter?

How has prayer solved your situations of opposition?

Are our spiritual lives so close with God that we identify with Him in everything, even to the extent that we imprecate others?

How is God like a Lamb and a Lion?

How do we explain the imprecatory prayers in the Bible?