



Studies in Ezra & Nehemiah

Text

Nehemiah 4:1-23

Topic

Threatened with attack by their enemies,  
Nehemiah instructs those helping build  
the wall to rally to him whenever they hear  
the blowing of the trumpet

Title

*“Helpers & the Nehemiah Brass”*

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It makes it worse that they don't know they are surrounded.

Butch and Sundance get in a gunfight with the local Bolivian police. Wounded, they take cover in a building. As they banter about next going to Australia, and learning to swim, the army arrives, and hundreds of soldiers surround the area.

Thinking that they can make a run to their horses, Butch and Sundance charge out of the building six-guns blazing. The image mercifully freezes to the sound of rifles firing repeatedly.

I got to thinking about being **surrounded** by your enemies because that is the situation Nehemiah found himself in. The enemies are listed in verse seven: Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites.

Bible commentators who know the geography of Jerusalem agree that they were surrounded on all sides.

If you are in Christ, **you are surrounded on all sides by supernatural enemies:**

- Jesus referred to Satan as “the ruler of this world” (John 12:31). Paul calls him “the prince of the power of the air” (Ephesians 2:2), and “the god of this world” (Second Corinthians 4:4). John says, “We know that we are of God, and the whole world is in the power of the evil one” (First John 5:19).

- In Ephesians we are told Satan has a hierarchy of supernatural colleagues, called “principalities, powers, the rulers of the darkness of this age, the spiritual *hosts* of wickedness...” (6:12).

One resource described Satan’s rule over the world with these words:

Satan is the major influence on the ideals, opinions, goals, hopes and views of the majority of people. His influence also encompasses the world’s philosophies, education, and commerce. The thoughts, ideas, speculations and false religions of the world are under his control and have sprung from his lies and deceptions.

Your Christian young adult goes off to college. He or she is mocked and ridiculed for being an evangelical. Their faith is undermined by godless philosophies. They are surrounded.

We are quite literally surrounded by the physical world that is “in the power of the wicked one.”

Ah, but you've already thought about what I'm going to say next. **We are also surrounded by the Lord and His heavenly host.**

In the Old Testament book of Second Kings, Elisha's servant was afraid on account of the advances of the Syrian army against them. Elisha said to him, "Do not fear, for those who *are* with us *are* more than those who *are* with them." And Elisha prayed, and said, "LORD, I pray, open his eyes that he may see." Then the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw. And behold, the mountain *was* full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha (6:16-17).

Surrounded by both God *and* the god of this world, we have a choice to make as to who we focus upon.

I'll organize my comments around two points: #1 You Can Choose To Live Surrounded By Him, and #2 You Can Refuse To Live Surrounded By Them.

## #1 You Can Choose To Live Surrounded By Him

(v1-6)

I don't think Elisha saw angels surrounding him all the time. It's more likely that he understood by faith that he *must* be surrounded by a heavenly host. He asked the Lord to open his servants eyes to see by sight what he 'saw' by faith.

We don't need to see supernatural beings surrounding us. We believe they are there on account of the Word of God. We can choose what Nehemiah chose to see - God surrounding him and not the enemy.

Neh 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.

Sanballat was a continual irritant to Nehemiah and to the work of rebuilding.

Before you start thinking about people who irritate you, ask yourself, “Am I an irritant to others? Or am I a salve, soothing and comforting, supportive?” Ask yourself and try to be honest.

Something spiritual was going on, behind the scenes, that stirred-up Sanballat against the Jews. Something spiritual, behind the scenes, is always going on. After all, the world is all around us.

Sanballat’s weapon of choice was mocking, and we see him wielding it skillfully in the next verse.

Neh 4:2 And he spoke before his brethren and the army of Samaria, and said, "What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they fortify themselves? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they complete it in a day? Will they revive the stones from the heaps of rubbish - *stones* that are burned?"

I submit to you that mocking is spiritual recognition.

Someone has definitely noticed what you are doing, what you are trying to accomplish, and it's bothering them.

Neh 4:3 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 basically says, "Well, if they *do* complete it, it won't be very sturdy." It revealed a worry, an anxiety, that the Jews just might be successful, despite Sanballat's mocking.

Again, when it comes to serving the Lord, opposition can be a great encouragement, if we so choose. Let's see how Nehemiah responded.

Neh 4:4 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!

Neh 4:5 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.

Before you give Nehemiah a fist pump, let's talk about his approach. This kind of praying, found throughout the Old Testament, is called "imprecatory." It invokes judgment, calamity, or curses, upon one's enemies, or upon those perceived as the enemies of God.

*It's not OK to pray imprecatory prayers in the Church Age.* Nehemiah lived under the Old Covenant, in which God promised to bless Israel for obedience, but to bring calamity upon them for disobedience. It was perfectly understandable that the Jews would pray imprecatory prayers towards their enemies.

Our model for prayer is what? Right - the Lord's Prayer. There is no way you can fit imprecatory statements into a prayer follows the template Jesus gave us.



Jesus exhorted us to pray for our enemies, but praying for their death or for bad things to happen to them isn't what He meant. Instead, we are to pray for their salvation first and foremost, and then for God's will to be done.

Neh 4:6 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.

Nehemiah met opposition with the spiritual discipline of prayer. Even though his prayer was imprecatory, he left taking any action against his opponents to God.

Mocking and ridicule were no threat to the Jews; no physical threat. They didn't need to respond at all, let alone respond in kind.

Can you do that? Refuse to respond? It's hard to not defend yourself. Look, I know we all crave recognition, and we all cave at mocking and ridicule. We need to rise above it.

A little tougher skin under the armor of God suits a believer surrounded by supernatural and natural opponents seeking to stumble us, to see us fail and fall.

**Michael W. Smith** released an album in early 2018 titled, *Surrounded*. The lyric of the title song captures what we are saying about choice:

*It may look like I'm surrounded  
But I'm surrounded by You*

I could see Nehemiah humming something like that. It needs to be our tune, too, as we choose to live surrounded by Him - by our Lord, Jesus

#2 You Can Refuse  
To Live Surrounded By Them  
(v7-23)

If you don't think you can refuse to live surrounded by your opponents, then you are not familiar with Marine Corps Lieutenant General Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller.

Recognized by five Navy Crosses and numerous other valor awards, Puller was equally well-known for his sayings. Two of them reveal his approach to being surrounded:

1. “They’re on our left, they’re on our right, they’re in front of us, they’re behind us... *They can’t get away this time.*”
2. “We’re surrounded. *That simplifies the problem.*”

Nehemiah took a page out of Puller’s ‘surrounded’ philosophy.

Neh 4:7 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,

Opposition broadened, and it accelerated. It will in your life as well. The world, the flesh, and the devil are relentless, life-long enemies.

As you get stronger in the Lord, they never weaken. Not until the Lord deals with Satan, sin and death at His Second Coming, and at the creation of new heavens and a new earth.

Neh 4:8 and all of them conspired together to come *and* attack Jerusalem and create confusion.

Nehemiah possessed papers from the powerful potentate of Persia permitting the project to proceed peacefully.

The enemies could not attack directly without defying the king. They were therefore going to resort to terrorism - quick, sneak attacks that “create confusion.”

Satan and his minions are terrorists. They rarely come at you directly. If they do, it’s a diversion. They have lots of time to plan years ahead. Their plans are devious, sinister, vicious, evil. You don’t see them coming. They explode in your face.

Neh 4:9 Nevertheless we made our prayer to our God, and because of them we set a watch against them day and night.

Until now, Nehemiah had relied solely on prayer. Here he “set a watch.” Throughout the rest of this episode we will see two complimentary strategies:

1. One is Godward: A total faith in God to oversee the Israelites.
2. The other is man-ward: A total commitment to persevere in the work despite opposition.

Neh 4:10 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."

Neh 4:11 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."

Neh 4:12 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."

As it always does, fear crippled faith. The Jews started to say to themselves that the work was too hard, too demanding, impossible.

**Of course it is.** The things God commands you to do - *you can't do them*. You need the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. He must do the works through you.

Then nothing is impossible with God, and you can do all things through Jesus strengthening you.

Neh 4:13 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.

Nehemiah issued everyone a CCW permit. (Not quite, I guess, since these weren't really concealed weapons).

We have been issued armor - called the whole armor of God in Ephesians. I won't go through all of it. It's enough to know that we have it, and that it is more than adequate for us to resist and overcome the devil.

Neh 4:14 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.

The Lord would fight for them AND they were to fight. Sounds contrary:

- Some people say, "God helps those who help themselves."
- Others - "Let go, and let God."

Both are wrong. God works; you work. It makes sense if you're a believer. There's another saying, attributed to Augustine, that though not perfect, comes close to capturing this thought: "Pray as though everything depended on God; Work as though everything depended on you."

Neh 4:15 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.

Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites saw the hand of God in the faith of the Israelites. They didn't fear the Jews because they had armed themselves; they knew "God had brought their plot to nothing."

Don't leave your work for the Lord, but if you have - return to it.

Neh 4:16 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.

Neh 4:17 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.

“The sword and the trowel,” one in each hand, has become an endearing image for believers. As an image, it perfectly conveys the sense of these verses - faith and works in harmony.

It’s a good image, a great image... But have you ever tried masonry with one hand? It just isn’t feasible. We see so in the next verse.

Neh 4:18 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.

Neh 4:19 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.

Neh 4:20 Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us."

It makes you wonder what the trumpeter played - what tune:

- Probably not *All You Need is Love*, by the Beatles.
- How about *Feels So Good*, by Chuck Mangione?
- I know: *When the Saints Go Marching In*, by Louis Armstrong.

Neh 4:21 So we labored in the work, and half of *the men* held the spears from daybreak until the stars appeared.

Neh 4:22 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."

They worked harder, longer, than ever before.

Often - too often - a family will realize it is in trouble and decide that they need to spend more time together. But where do they find the extra time? Usually by spending less time and effort serving the Lord. Church attendance is sacrificed for “quality family time.”

BTW: Church attendance in America is at an historic low with only 50% saying they are members of a church - down from 70% in 1999.

Neh 4:23 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.

They slept with their clothes on. Some of the workers, you might recall, were perfumers by trade. I'll bet they made a killing selling deodorant on the side.

We've been given armor from God, to keep on.

We are also described as being clothed in the white robe of Jesus' righteousness. There is no taking it off to indulge in the world.

**Satan** hasn't taken a vacation for at least 7,000 years, since he was in the Garden of Eden tempting our parents. He has confirmed reservations after the Great Tribulation for the Abyss, and after the Millennial Kingdom, the Lake of Fire. For now, he and his are on the prowl - working ceaselessly to ruin you.

Like Nehemiah, you can choose who you 'see' surrounding you. Set your mind by these two principles:

1. "Those who *are* with us *are* more than those who *are* with them" (Second Kings 6:16).
2. "He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world" (First John 4:4).

Around you... In you... as Lt. General Puller said, "That simplifies the problem."

