

Nehemiah 5&6 “When the going gets tough”

CCH Sermon 1st March 2020

V 14

If you are going to be involved in building God’s Kingdom, you are going to face hardship. It’s not an option. Setbacks are going to happen. Jesus was crucified, Peter was martyred, Paul who experienced (among other things) his thorn in the flesh, twice tells Timothy to “join with me in suffering” (2 Tim 1:8, 2:3), and for the next few chapters we will see Nehemiah face challenge after challenge. Today we are going to see four of them. Two from outside, and two from inside.

And these 2 chapters are going to be incredibly important for us in our little church plant. Because if, as we pray, we are going to play a small part in building God’s Kingdom here in Huntingdon, we too are going to face difficulties.

I’ve been in paid full time Christian ministry for 23 years now. I’ve seen two of the men I’ve worked under in tears, another one involved in scandal. I’ve seen people in Christian ministry give up, and I led a church plant for four years which was shut down. I have friends in ministry this week facing cancer, separation from their children, court cases, mental health and eye surgery. Even in our own church in one life group 6 out of the 7 households have experienced bereavement with the death of a family member in the last few months.

If you are going to be involved in building God’s kingdom you are going to face hardship. The question is... What do you do when the going gets tough? Well the answer is there in v14.

The tough get going? No: “Remember the Lord!”

Let’s work through three of these challenges in chapter 4, and we will mainly leave the fourth one in chapter 5 for bible study on your own or in groups, (there are dig deeper questions on the way out).

1) Let’s look at the first external challenge. V1-6 **INSULTS**

In v1 & 3 we bump into Sanballat, and Tobiah again. They are two local leaders of neighbouring ethnic groups. We met them in chapter 2, and we’ll meet them again multiple times. They seem to be powerful and well-connected local men siding either with the Samaritans- the mixed race tribes to the North, or the Ammonites (not fossils!) but a small nation to the East. They seem power hungry men wanting to keep a good reputation with king Artaxerxes of the local Persian superpower, and their names are backed up outside of the Bible as well.

Why are they so angry that the wall is being built up? It could be **personal**- just jealousy when someone else makes progress. It could be **racial**- not wanting the Jews to succeed. It could be **political**- they are rocking the balance under the local superpower, or it may be **religious**- “are you saying your God, Temple, Sacrifices are better than ours?”

There’s a machine gun fire of very painful questions in v2. Questions can get under your skin can’t they? It’s one thing for a thick henchman to joke that your wall is so puny a small mammal could knock it over as Tobiah does in v3. But when a powerful ruler turns to his whole army and asks 5 questions it must be pretty painful. v2.

Questions are powerful. Satan used them in the garden. “Did God really say?” and his fingerprints are all over these chapters. You can abuse someone on social media really blatantly, or more painfully you can ask subtle questions that attack their aims, their methods, even their religious practices. V2.

But Nehemiah is a great model to us. What is his first port of call? **Prayer**. In fact in this memoir style book, it’s as if he copies out his entry from his prayer journal that day. V4. *“Hear us, our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders”*.

Again and again through all these difficulties, Nehemiah looks up. Where do you turn when you face difficulties? To your spouse, to your friends, to google, to the bottle, to retaliation?

But Nehemiah doesn't give as good as he gets to Sanballat and Tobiah with more colourful language. **Nehemiah turned to God in prayer.** In fact his prayer, like some of the Psalms, is shockingly bold in asking God not to let them get away with their sin. He turns to God in prayer. Prayer is the first port of call, not the last.

*"Have we trials and temptations?
Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged
Take it to the Lord in prayer"¹.*

My friend, are you facing a painful trial in your life at the moment? Especially as you try to build up the church, or reach out to a friend with the good news? You are trying to do God's work, and you just get pushback after pushback. You never thought it would be this hard, or this complicated, or this slow, or this painful.

You thought you might get thanks for trying to do God's work, but you only face insults, or the 21st century Western equivalent: apathy or the silent treatment. Well do what Jesus tells us to do in the sermon on the mount. *"Go to your room, close the door and talk to your (heavenly) Father who is unseen. Ask and it will be given you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you"*². Take it to the Lord in prayer. Tell him all about it. He is listening. He is loving. He loves you! He LOVES to listen to your prayers. And they make a real difference.

V4&5 "Hear us O God". Prayer, and setback no 1 is overcome as morale returns and the people rally together v6: *"So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart"*. I wonder if you have come to learn that prayer is the first port of call?

¹ *Hymn: What a friend we have in Jesus- Joseph Scriven*

² Matt 6:6 & 7:7.

2) Let's turn to the second phase of external threat. V7-9 **VIOLENCE**.

Have you heard "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me?" Well having tried words, Sanballat and Tobiah try sticks and stones- just basic, plain, no nonsense violence.

Now they come back with people from the South and the West just to now complete all the points of the compass. And they move from psychological warfare to guerrilla warfare.

V7: But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the people of Ashdod heard that the repairs to Jerusalem's walls had gone ahead and that the gaps were being closed, they were very angry. V8 They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it.

Violence against Christians is rare in our culture, though I did have a friend who got beaten up every week for going to his Christian Union at boarding school. Perhaps tragically, we may see more of it. But around the world it is the norm for Christians to be physically threatened.

Tim Keese has written an amazing book "Dispatches from the Front" about his visits to churches in the most difficult parts of the world. During a visit to Liberia in West Africa he meets *Washington*- a carpenter who used to be a demon worshipper. He turned to the Lord Jesus, and his life was turned from darkness to light. But unfortunately, his old "friends" came out to beat him and kidnap him. Pastor Dennis got there just in time and told them that if they raised a hand against Washington, they were lifting their hands against Washington's God, and one by one they slunk away into the forest³.

Well like Washington and pastor Dennis, Nehemiah also experiences protection as he builds the walls. The secret of protection is in v9 and it's an amazing combination.

³ "Dispatches from the Front". Stories of gospel advance in the World's difficult places p164. See also his videos on <https://www.dispatchesfromthefront.org/>.

There's prayer again v9. *"But we prayed to our God"*. Nehemiah has such a big view of God, but also a personal view of God who is committed to him and his people in a covenant relationship. And we've seen him turn to prayer again and again in this book. Prayer the first port of call. We too have a personal relationship with the Almighty God through the Lord Jesus Christ, and yet we can call him "our God", Our Father in Heaven. What an amazing privilege. Make the most of it!

But prayer is not all he does. *"And posted a guard day and night to meet this threat"*.

Now I find this fascinating. Nehemiah has this wonderful combination of practicality and prayer. He takes it to the Lord with prayer, and he takes it to the people with a plan.

I think we learn from Nehemiah that you can be both spiritual and practical. And that the two aren't mutually exclusive.

Nehemiah models prayerful practicality.

Some of us are **do-ers**. And before we see the problem we've seen the solution and are on it with suggestions, plans and google documents.

Others of us are **pray-ers** (by which I mean inactive pray-ers- people who pray but don't look for how God may be answering that prayer, perhaps using our God given common sense to find a solution).

The danger of the "doers" is that we "do" in our own strength, and fail to wait on the Lord. The danger of the "prayers" (if I can put it like that) is that we wait so long, we never get on with looking for a solution!

Prayer & Practicality are not mutually exclusive. And Nehemiah models both. It's good to pray AND it's good to act. In fact, we often find that we get some of my best insights & ideas when we're praying about something. Nehemiah faced insults, and he faced violence, and God got him through both! But the third phase may have been even harder....

Well let's move to the third challenge. And here we move from *external*- threats without, to *internal*- dangers within.

In the book of Acts, Satan sought to destroy the church with persecution from outside, and also immorality and false teaching from within⁴. But it's a particular kind of internal danger we see next in Nehemiah, and one that perhaps is very common in church planting.

3) Let's look at the rest of chapter 4 under the title **DISCOURAGEMENT**.

Phase 3 starts in v10. *"Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, 'The strength of the labourers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall.'"*

The people are discouraged. They are totally ground down. They've been trying to build this wall with old materials from the rubble pile, which is hard enough, but v11 and 12 they report back what the gossip on the streets is. V11 Death threats. V12 the cheery phrase "Wherever you turn they will attack us" from the heroes that are coming in from other towns to build Jerusalem up.

Jim Packer in his excellent book on Nehemiah, says *"few if any churches lack friends, of a sort, who feel it is there special ministry to impart negative assurances of this kind, and who never doubt that their doomsaying is the most helpful contribution they can make."... "With friends like that, who needs enemies?!"*⁵

Wonderfully, I think that our church is a rare church where people are incredibly positive, I can't think of a time when someone has been critical in a destructive way. But it's not difficult for discouragement to creep in.

Maybe it's in **outreach**. You've tried to talk to a colleague about church. You've invited them. You believe that this is the most important news in the world that can take them from hell to heaven, but they just aren't interested. It's not that they hate you, they just don't care.

⁴ See also John Stott's BST commentary on Acts p88-89

⁵ JI Packer, "A passion for faithfulness" p105.

Maybe it's in **service**. Another week comes around, and your job is to prepare for the kids group or the bible study or the tech screens AGAIN. And at weeks 6 of a church plant it's all shiny and new and exciting. But on week 76 as we are now, it's easy to get weary.

Or perhaps it's in **discipleship**. That situation that you are helping someone with or that temptation you are battling, just doesn't get seem to show any progress. In fact it's going downhill, it's getting worse. Discouragement sets in.

These things feel like an enemy army encircling the fragile city on all sides, threatening us at our most vulnerable positions. When these negative thoughts surround you, you wonder if you are even going to make it, and you start to believe the enemy's lies.

Well prayerful practicality. This time, we read of the practical action first. V13. *"Therefore I stationed some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families, with their swords, spears and bows"*.

Nehemiah is genius. It's a heightened phase of danger for the people, so he ramps up the security. He does so strategically in the places where the walls are most vulnerable, and he does so in family units which heightens what's at stake when your kids and siblings are on either side and must give an extra sense of solidarity.

But the decisive thing to raise morale is not the sideways pointing to the guards and swords, but the upwards pointing to God. I do believe this (v14) is the key verse of the chapter, and key for us today *"Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome"*. That description comes three times in the book⁶. God is GREAT. He is AWESOME.

Some of you today have problems that are so big that you don't know where to begin. They are paralysing and enormous. But you do know that God is bigger don't you? The GREAT AND AWESOME GOD.

As in that Colin Buchanan song we just sang with the kids, *"Remember the Lord, remember that he's in control"*.

You do know how powerful he is don't you?

- Powerful enough to create all the stars with a word.
- Powerful enough to rescue his people through the Red Sea.
- Powerful enough to persevere w his people all through the OT.
- Powerful enough to send his Son into the world to rescue us.
- Powerful enough to wipe all our sins away on the cross.
- Powerful enough to raise Jesus and us from the grave.
- Powerful enough to take sinners to be with him in heaven.

Is he powerful enough to get the people through this situation?

Yes.

And he did.

V14, 15 *"Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes.' When our enemies heard that we were aware of their plot and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to our work."*

And is he powerful enough to get you through your problems, and us through our problems? Yes. Even if they are not solved until the next life. But he will act. And he will help if you will ask him, and he .

In fact the rest of chapter 4 shows that the people experience a time of relative peace undisturbed from Sanballat the "horrible-ite" and his cronies. And Nehemiah put all sorts of great plans into place so that everyone carried a weapon up their sleeve even when they were on the pneumatic drill. V18. And he built in a kind of early warning signal rapid response alarm with a guy on the trumpet v19-20. And he didn't consider as leader that he was immune from hardship too. V23. *"Neither I nor my brothers nor my men nor the guards with me took off our clothes; each had his own weapon, even when he went for water"*. So Number 3 difficulty was counteracted again with God's help.

⁶ 1:5, 4:14, 9:32

4) Chapter 5 shows a further internal challenge. **FINANCIAL STRIFE**, as loan sharks kick people who are already financially stretched when they are down.

I'm going to leave this for your own study, and there are questions and a few notes to take with you home today, perhaps for life groups. But can I read you the executive summary in v9 & 10...

So I continued, 'What you are doing is not right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let us stop charging interest!

When the pressure is on, internal strife can arise within the community. And this happens here. And it often is related to money. And it puts people in a terrible situation.

Incidentally, it's why we are thrilled to support the work of HAMA the Huntingdon Area Money Advice which helps people facing debt. Both Emma and I have experience in our families of the devastation debt can cause, and it's great that Nicola is training to be one of their workers.

But once again, fundamentally, Nehemiah points the people upward to God. *"Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God?" V9.*

It actually reminds me of the thief on the cross next to Jesus at the end of Luke's gospel. He remembered the Lord before it was too late. *"Don't you fear God... we are getting what our deeds deserve".*

Like Nehemiah, he looked upwards to remember the Lord. And he found in Jesus hope in the bleakest of situations. As he faced actual death (not just the threat of death like in Neh 4& 5), he found life. He said "Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom". And Jesus answered him something that will be true in their final perhaps darkest moments for anyone who puts their trust in him. *"Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise".* **Let's pray.**