

Study Notes: Nehemiah 4:7-21
September 3, 2023: “Armed for Battle, Ready to Work”
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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. They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.

- When the enemies of the people realized that their taunts and ridicule had not stopped the people, their anger increased and they escalated their response, now plotting to fight against the people and stir up trouble.
- Nehemiah heard about this threat, and as was his pattern, he immediately brought the matter to the Lord in prayer. Along with praying, Nehemiah also took practical action. He posted a guard to watch out for potential attacks from the enemy. The New American Commentary notes, “Nehemiah’s response was clear: prayer and precaution, trust and good management. He trusted God, but he also was aware of the dangers and took the necessary precautions.”

Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, “The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall.” Also our enemies said, “Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work.” Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, “Wherever you turn, they will attack us.”

- In the midst of the work, the people also grew weary and morale began to slip. In Judah, the people began to lament that the job before them was overwhelming. The enemies of the people were spreading the word that they would come and attack quickly before the people could stop an attack, and the Jews were also spreading this same word.
- This internal discouragement was a serious issue that Nehemiah now faced, and he needed to take action.

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. After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, “Don’t be afraid of them. 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 own work.

- After hearing about the discouragement of the people and the continued threats of war, Nehemiah took practical action and encouraged the people with the truth.
- He stationed people in the vulnerable places on the wall, and then encouraged the people by reminding them of the power of the Lord, as well as what was at stake. This, in turn, encouraged the people and it also showed the enemies of God’s people that their plot had been discovered.
- After this immediate threat was taken care of, all the people got back to the work that they were doing. Even in the midst of hardship, Nehemiah and the people stayed focused on the goal, which was rebuilding the wall.
- Nehemiah was careful to mention that “God had frustrated the plot.” The New American Commentary explains, “Again, Nehemiah gave God the credit. God used Nehemiah’s faith and leadership, but it was God who brought success (Phil 2:13).”

From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armor. The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah who were building the wall. Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other, and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked. But the man who sounded the trumpet stayed with me. Then I said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, “The work is extensive and spread out, and we are widely separated from each other along the wall. Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!”

- After the threat, work resumed, but there were some precautions that Nehemiah took. He now split the workers, having some of them act as armed guards. Everyone who worked was armed and ready to do battle if needed.
 - The New American Commentary gives insight on the group of people who Nehemiah calls “his men”, “The term must refer to a special group of helpers or a bodyguard (cf. 5:10, 16; 13:19). These helpers apparently had more armor than the average worker. ‘The officers’ posted behind the builders may have represented Nehemiah’s armed men or another defense force.”
- Nehemiah also had someone who would sound the trumpet if needed. While the people must keep working, when they heard the trumpet, they were to join together and help their brothers.
- Nehemiah also reminded the people that God would fight on their behalf. Nehemiah likely had in mind the ways that God interceded and fought for His people in the past. Nehemiah’s trust was built on God’s faithfulness.

So we continued the work with half the men holding spears, from the first light of dawn till the stars came out. At that time I also said to the people, “Have every man and his helper stay inside Jerusalem at night, so they can serve us as guards by night and as workers by day.” Neither I nor my brothers nor my men nor the guards with me took off our clothes; each had his weapon, even when he went for water.

- The work continues this way, and Nehemiah called the people to remain in the city at night, rather than returning to their homes. Nehemiah and the people remained vigilant at all times, even when they took breaks and went for water.
 - The Faithlife Study Bible explains, “The terse Hebrew phrase used here—ish shilcho hammayim (literally, ‘a man, his weapon, the waters’)—could mean that the men did not even remove their weapons when bathing or getting a drink of water. Alternately, the Hebrew word for ‘water’ is graphically similar to the word for ‘right hand,’ so the text may have originally indicated that they kept their weapons close at hand. Either way, they were constantly on guard.”
 - The Expositor’s Bible Commentary adds, “Whether awake or asleep, however, Nehemiah and his immediate entourage ... set an example of constant vigilance. With a weapon to hand and dressed at all times for action, they could not be accused of laying harder burdens on others than they themselves were willing to shoulder.”