

NEHEMIAH

Part 3: “Spiritual Warfare and the Mission of God”

Nehemiah 4:1 –14

By David A. Ritchie

Sunday, October 3, 2021 (Ordinary Time)

Scripture Reading

“Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews. And he said in the presence of his brothers and of the army of Samaria, ‘What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore it for themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish up in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, and burned ones at that?’ Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, ‘Yes, what they are building—if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall!’ Hear, O our God, for we are despised. Turn back their taunt on their own heads and give them up to be plundered in a land where they are captives. Do not cover their guilt, and let not their sin be blotted out from your sight, for they have provoked you to anger in the presence of the builders. So we built the wall. And all the wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work. But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and that the breaches were beginning to be closed, they were very angry. And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it. And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night. In Judah it was said, ‘The strength of those who bear the burdens is failing. There is too much rubble. By ourselves we will not be able to rebuild the wall.’ And our enemies said, ‘They will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work.’ At that time the Jews who lived near them came from all directions and said to us ten times, ‘You must return to us.’ So in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, in open places, I stationed the people by their clans, with their swords, their spears, and their bows. And I looked and arose and said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, ‘Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes”’ (Nehemiah 4:1–14, ESV).

Review of Series

Nehemiah is a story about the people of God, in a time of great brokenness, uniting together to accomplish something extraordinary by the power of God.

It is one of the more inspiring stories of revival in the Old Testament. Even more, it is a picture of who we as the church are called to be today. The book of Nehemiah has lots to teach us about what it means to love our city, serve our city, and bring healing and

restoration to the places wherever there is brokenness in our city. But Nehemiah is also a charge for us to faithfully recover a sense of what it means to be the people of God in a time when there has been great brokenness in the church.

So, if you are a part of Redeemer, and you have yet to find a place of connection and involvement, I hope and pray that you will be inspired by Nehemiah to find your place in the mission we share together as a church.

Your place in the mission might be a role within the ministries of the church, such as: teaching the Bible to our kids, making sure our guests feel welcomed and loved, or helping out on our worship and sound team.

Your place in the mission might be in serving our city. We have many Redeemer members who are engaged in serving with Refugee Language Project. We have members who have served through our partner organizations like Amarillo Children's Home, Young Life, and Snack Pak 4 Kids. When people are serving through organizations who are helping our city, that is not different from or in addition to our mission—it is our mission.

Our mission is displayed when, as a people, we are salt in light within our world. Our mission is displayed when we choose to display the fruit of the Spirit in a culture of outrage. Our mission is when we invite our unconnected neighbors to into the life of Christ that is experienced in our Gospel Communities and in our times of worship together.

Our church is not a conglomeration of programs. Our church is a *people*—filled with the Spirit of Christ, continuing the mission of Christ. And we have been called to participate in God's restorative work in our world.

Introduction Into Today's Passage

However, wherever God is moving, there you will find the spiritual powers of darkness opposing both God and his people.

In today's passage, we see a vivid illustration of such opposition in the villains of Sanballat and Tobiah. In Nehemiah, Sanballat and Tobiah are rulers who govern the Persian province of the Trans-Euphrates, or the province Beyond the River. These rulers are like gang lords, who protect their authority in a given territory by threats, violence, and intimidation. They are men who benefit greatly from the people of Judah being in a position of vulnerability and weakness. Thus, they are enraged when Nehemiah unites the Jewish people to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. And they will try to sabotage Nehemiah's task at every single turn.

Throughout many years of Christian interpretation, Sanballat and Tobiah are visual symbols of the spiritual warfare that is waged against the people of God. As Paul reminds us in his letter to the Ephesians, ***“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over***

this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12).

Simply said, we need to know that these spiritual “rulers” and “authorities” (or if you prefer the old King James language, “principalities” and “powers”) will oppose the people of God when we try to press into who God has called us to be and what God has called us to do.

We are called to faithfully stand against these powers. And to do this well, we must be aware of their tactics, so that we will not be outwitted by their designs (cf. 2 Cor 2:11).

So, with that in mind, we will take a deeper look into Nehemiah chapter 4 and explore the concepts of *“Spiritual Warfare and the Mission of God.”* And, in particular, we are going to explore three tactics of spiritual attack that are represented in this passage: *1.) Discourage to Deplete, 2.) Distract to Divide, and 3.) Disarm to Destroy.*

Exposition

1.) Discourage to Deplete

Let’s look back at our text: *“Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews. And he said in the presence of his brothers and of the army of Samaria, ‘What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore it for themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish up in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, and burned ones at that?’ Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, ‘Yes, what they are building—if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall!’” (Neh 4:1–3).*

The first tactic that these enemies use is simply to attack with their words. They mock Nehemiah and the people of Jerusalem. They minimize the work of rebuilding, and they cast doubt on whether or not the walls will even be able to stand. The implication is that these pitiful walls wouldn’t be able to survive a gust of wind, much less a military attack.

They have a goal in this, by the way. They want the people of God to think that their work is futile. They want the people of God to feel like their labors are in vain and not worth it. They want to convince the people of God that their weakness is inevitable, their situation is hopeless, and that change isn’t possible.

They want to ***discourage*** the people of God so that they might be ***depleted*** and no longer willing to work together for their mission.

Now, here’s the thing whether you are engaging in ministry as your job or ministry as a way of volunteer service, you will find that the ministry can be very trying and challenging. Ministry is a privilege. It is meaningful, and, at times, full of awe and joy. But there are also many moments while serving people in which you are confronted with immense suffering and brokenness in people’s lives and in the world at large.

It's easy in this situation to feel overwhelmed or grow overly critical or overly cynical. You can experience burnout or compassion fatigue. You can feel devastated and wounded when you are criticized.

What you need to realize is that this experience is not just a regular part of ministry—it is a form of spiritual attack.

I know in my own life and ministry, it is easy to myopically focus on the things in the church that are the most challenging, the ministry situations that are the most heartbreaking, the voices that are the most critical, or the places in our city where there is the most need.

But, as recently as this week, I have felt challenged by the Lord to broaden my field of vision to intentionally pay attention to evidences of God's grace that are all around me.

Last summer, my family took a vacation to Tybee Island, Georgia. One morning my wife woke up early to collect seashells along the beach. She spent quite some time with her head hunched over, looking for whole shells amidst the broken shards all along the shoreline. But, then, she looked up to behold the glory of the sunrise over the Atlantic. She looked at the dazzling light that radiated across the clouds and the waves. Later that day, she told me how it reminded her of how easy it is to have our eyes fixed on only that which is broken right in front of us, when God's glory is shining all around us.

Part of standing firm in our spiritual battles simply involves a determination to never neglect the blessings of God that are around us, evening in the midst of suffering and sorrow.

And sometimes, we actually need one another to help each other have eyes to see. I know there have been times in my life when the encouragement of other Christians has shown the light of God's joy into the darkness of my discouragement.

Spiritual warfare is not a private enterprise.¹

We need to put ourselves in relationships within Christian community, where we can receive encouragement when we are discouraged. We need to be those who are willing to give encouragement so that we might endure with resilience and joy.

2.) Distract to Divide

Sanballat and Tobiah's jeers do not dissuade Nehemiah or the people of Jerusalem. In prayer, they reminded themselves that God is their victory and vindication. So, they build the wall (Neh 4:6).

¹ As I have mentioned in several previous sermons, the Greek language makes it very clear that "you," the individual, do not put on the whole armor of God. Rather, "y'all," the corporate church, put on the whole armor of God (cf. Eph 6:1–20).

As a result, the enemies of God's people up the ante of their attack: *"But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and that the breaches were beginning to be closed, they were very angry. And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it"* (Neh 4:7–8).

A keyword in those last few verses is *"confusion."* The goal now is to create chaos and take the attention of the workers away from their task at hand. They also want to create a knee jerk reaction of fear, and it almost works.

Look back at our text, *"In Judah it was said, 'The strength of those who bear the burdens is failing. There is too much rubble. By ourselves we will not be able to rebuild the wall.' And our enemies said, 'They will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work.' At that time the Jews who lived near them came from all directions and said to us ten times, 'You must return to us'"* (Neh 4:10–12).

Sanballat and Tobiah want to create enough confusion that the people of Judah abandon the wall, abandon Jerusalem, and then isolate themselves into the smaller outlying communities.

They are **distracting** the people of God so that they can **divide** the people of God.

But Nehemiah keeps the people of God focused on task. He says, *"So in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, in open places, I stationed the people by their clans, with their swords, their spears, and their bows. And I looked and arose and said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, 'Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes'"* (Neh 4:13–14).

Nehemiah arms the people to fend off potential attacks. But he refocuses them on the task at hand to rebuild the wall. And, even more importantly, he refocuses them on the glory of God!

We must be a people who are vigilant to focus our hearts on the glory of Christ and the privilege of the mission he has given us. We must be a people who redirect one another to that which is most important, as we resist the siren calls of our distracted age all around us.

If the enemy cannot discourage us, he will attempt to distract us. In fact, I think that distraction is perhaps the greatest challenge that wars against the task of Christian discipleship in the American church today.

In fact, recent studies have shown the number one reason that people do not attend church in the United States is *not unbelief*—it's that people think they are *too busy*. It's not that we think church or the Christian faith are unimportant, it's that we are too distracted to see how eternally important they really are.

But distraction is a difficult thing to self-diagnose. If you're distracted, you probably don't know you're distracted, which is why you're still distracted.

So, because of that conundrum, I have a few litmus tests that you might use to reflect on whether or not you are distracted.

If you are completely caught up on a few of your favorite television programs and podcasts, but you can't remember the last time you spent time in prayer, you might be distracted.

If you spend hours a week on social media sites like Facebook, but don't have enough time to read the Bible, you might be distracted.

If you are willing to share your political views and passions with your co-workers but you are unwilling to share your Christian faith or invited people you know to church, you might be distracted.

If your church involvement is optional for your family, but sports involvement is a non-negotiable, you might be distracted.

I say these things not to shame you or offend you. I say these things because distraction from Christ and who he has called us to is a form of spiritual attack.

The kingdom of God is at hand! We have been invited to participate in what God is doing in history. Let's not give our best to lesser and non-eternal things.

As C.S. Lewis once wrote: *"...it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling around with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at sea. We are far too easily satisfied."*²

3.) Disarm to Destroy

Sanballat and Tobiah want the Jewish people to lay down their weapons out of fear. They want the Nehemiah and his people to run and scatter like a frightened herd of antelope, so that they can be devoured one by one. They want the people of God **disarmed** so that they can be **destroyed**.

But Nehemiah's leadership prevents their plan from succeeding. In the section just after today's passage, the Scripture reads, *"When our enemies heard that it was known to us and that God had frustrated their plan, we all returned to the wall, each to his work. From that day on, half of my servants worked on construction, and half held the spears, shields, bows, and coats of mail. And the leaders stood behind the whole house*

² C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: HarperOne, 1949), 26.

of Judah, who were building on the wall. Those who carried burdens were loaded in such a way that each labored on the work with one hand and held his weapon with the other” (Neh 4:15–17).

The work goes forward, but the people of God are armed with swords. So too, today, the people of God are commanded to take up what the Apostle Paul calls “*...the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph 6:17b)*. Elsewhere, the author of Hebrews says, “*For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb 4:12).*

The word of God is central to standing strong against spiritual attack. Why? Because the word of God is truth against the power of deception. The word of God is hope against the power of despair. The word of God is grace against the power of performance. Against the powers of sin, Satan, and death, the word of God is the message of the gospel which is the power of God for salvation for all who believe.

So, make no mistake: we have a spiritual enemy, and that spiritual enemy does not want us to know, believe, and trust in the word of God. He does not want us to be reminded of the truth of God’s word on a daily basis. He does not want us to be washed in the word of God week after week as we come together and hear God’s word as a congregation.

But we need the word of God if we are to remain faithful to our task of proclaiming the gospel, loving our neighbors, and faithfully living out our call as the people of God.

We can put on some events here and there. We can get into deep discussions about the mysteries of life. We can do plenty of good humanitarian deeds in our own strength and will power. But without the word of the gospel being central to our life as a people, we will burn out and grow cynical we encounter discouragement. We will isolate ourselves into little tribes when we feel criticized or overwhelmed.

We need the word of God because God’s word reveals God’s holiness so that we can turn away from our sin. God’s word reveals that we were saved by grace—not by works—so that we can forgive those who have sinned against us, even our enemies. God’s word reveals that we were loved when we were unlovable, and that because of this, we are called to be emissaries of God’s love those who are broken. And most importantly, God’s word reveals Jesus—so that in beholding Jesus, we might become more like him (cf. 2 Cor 3:18).

Conclusion

In fact, God’s word has revealed the reason why we can confront spiritual attack with confidence and hope. For God’s word reveals Christ Jesus has taken the penalty of sin and defeated the power of death. By his resurrection and ascension, Christ has been enthroned in heaven over the spiritual powers of darkness that assail us.

Once, we were under the dominion of the powers of darkness. Once, we were dead in our sin.

“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:4–7).

If you have put your trust in Jesus, you have been seated with Christ in the heavenly place—above all rule and authority and power and dominion (Eph 1:21). You have been given the authority—or better said—we as the Church have been given the authority to oppose the spiritual attack that opposes us.

So, Redeemer Christian Church, let us remember that, yes, spiritual warfare is real. Yes, spiritual warfare can be trying and dangerous. But, because of Jesus, we can stand strong in the midst of spiritual attack and faithfully persist in the mission of God.

AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities

- 1.) Read Nehemiah 4:1–14 (you can even read the whole of chapter 4 for broader context). Summarize what is happening in this passage in your own words.
- 2.) Who are Sanballat and Tobiah? Why do you think many Christians have understood these characters to represent a form of spiritual attack (cf. Eph 6:12)?
- 3.) What is the purpose of Sanballat and Tobiah’s taunt in verses 1 through 4? In your experience, how have you seen discouragement to be a form of spiritual attack? How can discouragement be overcome?
- 4.) In a similar way, how have you seen distraction function as a form of spiritual attack? In what ways are you most tempted to be distracted from devotion to Christ and who he has called you to be?
- 5.) Nehemiah makes sure that the people of God are armed and ready for battle (see Neh 4:13–18). Read Ephesians 6:17 and Hebrew 4:12 and discuss the importance of the symbolism in these verses. Why is the word of God so crucial for engaging spiritual warfare?
- 6.) Finally, notice how a primary focus of Nehemiah’s leadership in this chapter is to keep the people of God *together*. How can division be a major source of spiritual attack in the church today? In light of this, why is church unity and Christian community so important for us to value and uphold?