

The Confusion Conspiracy

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[0:00] Last week we talked about how Nehemiah chapters 4 through 6 document the opposition to the rebuilding effort.

! The first six verses of chapter 4 showed us how Sanballat and his cronies disrupted the builders, or at least tried to disrupt them by mocking them. So for review, let's go ahead and read those first six verses so that we can see how they fit in with the rest of the chapter.

Starting with verse 1 of chapter 4, it says, But it so happened, when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, that he was furious and very indignant and mocked the Jews.

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?

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. Hear, O our God, for we are despised.

[1:16] Turn their reproach on their own heads, and give them as plunder to a land of captivity. 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.

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. We can tell by verse 6 that Sanballat's mocking failed to disrupt the work, and despite that failure, Sanballat refuses to give up.

Instead, he increases the intensity by conspiring to create confusion. And this confusion conspiracy is the subject of verses 7 through 23.

We'll go ahead and read 7 through 23 now. That will take us to the end of chapter 4. Starting in verse 7, it says, 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.

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. So it was when the Jews who dwelt near them came, they told us ten times, From whatever place you turn, they will be upon us.

[2:59] 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.

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.

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.

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.

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. 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.

[4:09] 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.

Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us. So we labored in the work, and half of the men held the spears from daybreak until the stars appeared. At the same time I also said to the people, Let each man and his servants stay a night in Jerusalem, that they may be our guard by night, and the working party by day. 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.

You can see that there is a conspiracy here to try to bring the Jews' efforts to naught. And the root cause of this confusion conspiracy is caused by anger.

Anger generally results from frustration, humiliation, or rejection. Sanballat and his pals face all three of these causes for anger.

[5:18] That's why the anger of Sanballat and his co-conspirators is not hard to trace. They feel frustrated because their earlier strategy failed, and this failure causes them to feel humiliated in the eyes of the influential men of the province.

They had ridiculed the Jews for their feebleness, and now they find that they've been thwarted by those feeble Jews. As a consequence, they suffer from lowered self-esteem.

They sense that the wealthy merchants and landowners now doubt their ability to deal with those in Judah, and this causes feelings of rejection for them. Sanballat knew what he was doing when he indoctrinated others with contempt for the Jews.

He was prejudicing people's minds against the Jews so that they would be of the mind to attack the Jews physically if the wall building continued. Our text tonight shows the Jews facing considerable adversity.

How they handled that adversity sets a good example for Christians today. An unknown author wrote, In times of adversity, many people lose their courage and display a weakness that is unnecessary.

[6:28] They assume that a loss or a disappointment is a failure when actually misfortune can mean opportunity. How often have you ever thought of it that way, that misfortune can mean opportunity?

It might help us deal with adversity a little better if we could look at it like that more often. But adversity tests the reality of faith, and as we shall see, nothing can prevent or hinder the Jews' prayers.

We'll divide tonight's text into three sections, beginning with verses 7 through 12. In those verses, we see the demoralizing dilemma. The demoralizing dilemma is what we'll see there.

Verses 7 and 8 set the scene. Here are those verses again. 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, and all of them conspired together to come and attack Jerusalem and create confusion.

Up to this point, except for a brief mention of Geshem the Arab, we've really only been told about Sanballat, the governor of Samaria, and Tobiah, the likely governor of Ammon.

[7:53] Now suddenly, there are four distinct groups mentioned here. We see Sanballat of Samaria, Tobiah of Ammon and his people, the Arabs, and the men of Ashdod.

The opposition was not going away just because Nehemiah had prayed about it. On the contrary, it actually was increasing, and it was becoming more threatening to them.

To realize the full force of this threat, we need to visualize it geographically. Samaria was to the north, Ammon was to the east, the Arabs were to the south, and the people of Ashdod were to the west.

So if we've got the north, south, east, and west covered, where else is there? Exactly. The opposition of Sanballat and Tobiah was now a coalition of those who gathered to entirely surround Jerusalem.

In military terms, Nehemiah must have known it was unlikely that his enemies would attack the city in full force. And that's because Nehemiah had the imposing authority of King Artaxerxes behind him.

[9:00] If the coalition of governors attacked him full force, they would be opposing Artaxerxes, the very thing that they were accusing the Jews of doing. On the other hand, though, Nehemiah also must have known that what we might call guerrilla warfare was likely.

It wouldn't take much of an effort for his enemies to sneak up on the city, surprise the builders, and kill some of them while they were trying to do their work. It was about a 22-day or more trip back to see King Artaxerxes, so by the time people got back to tell the king what happened, they'd have plenty of time to think up a good excuse, or just flat deny that they had anything to do with it.

Besides, Nehemiah knew that anything of this nature would so demoralize the people that the work would stop and might never get going again. So verse 9 shows us what Nehemiah did.

Nehemiah writes, Nevertheless, we made our prayer to our God, and because of them, we set a watch against them day and night. You see Nehemiah turning to two things there.

We see prayer and precaution. So those are prayer and precaution. And as soon as Nehemiah becomes aware of the conspiracy, he takes immediate action.

[10:19] Once again, he shows how faith and work actually go together. And that shows us that prayer is not a substitute for action. In addition to praying, Nehemiah also takes adequate precautions by setting a watch.

The spiritual preparation of the people becomes their inspiration as they undertake these new added responsibilities. Notice something else about verse 9, though. Look at who prayed.

The verse says, We made our prayer. Using the pronoun we there is significant because it reveals the effect of Nehemiah's own devout spirit on the people.

When we looked at verses 4 and 5 last week, they strongly suggest that Nehemiah led the prayers. This time, the people actually participated in the prayer.

If we stopped there for the night, we would think all is well. Based on verses 10 through 12, though, the enthusiasm generated from the prayer was short-lived.

[11:22] Listen to verses 10 through 12 again. 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.

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. So it was when the Jews who dwelt near them came that they told us 10 times, From whatever place you turn, they will be upon us.

The people had been working with all their heart as Nehemiah recorded in verse 6. Still, though, even though they'd been working so hard, the wall had reached just half its height.

And that was a big accomplishment, but they still had a long way to go. They still had that much left to do, and the strength and resolve of the people were beginning to give out. The outward cause of this concern is exhaustion.

The reduction of the number of workmen because of the appointment of the guard, not to mention the longer hours they were working, has increased the strain on those working inside the city. We know that opposition has an even greater chance of being effective when people are tired.

[12:38] We can tell from verse 11 that the opposition senses that the intimidation tactics are working. Just think about the situation. If the conspirators can make the people question Nehemiah's leadership and doubt God, the rebuilding effort will collapse from within.

They won't have to do anything but simply make a show of force. We see how wise Nehemiah is as a leader here, though, because he refuses to accept this admission of defeats at face value.

He explores a little further and uncovers the real reason for the deterioration of morale. The reason the men of Judah have given him is only a rationalization. It's just designed to make their failure look a little more respectable.

It's a defense to save them from losing face before the others. As is so often the case, though, the real reason for wanting to quit is internal, and it comes directly from the Jews who live near their enemies.

Those are the Jews who have picked up the gossip which Sanballat has leaked to them, and they have brought it into the city each day when they arrive for work. Look at verse 12 again for what the Jews told their fellow workers.

[13:52] It says, 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. The Jews repeated that woeful refrain more than once.

Notice how many times it says they repeated that. It says they repeated it ten times. We can tell from that that exhaustion was only a contributing factor to their despair.

What was the real reason of their fear there? It was actually the fear itself. They weren't afraid because of exhaustion.

They were just plain old afraid regardless of whether they were tired or not. And that fear undermined the Jews' resolve and eroded their confidence in Nehemiah.

The key to Nehemiah's successful handling of this crisis lies in his ability to accurately diagnose what is wrong. He finds that the problem is internal rather than external.

[14:54] Think about how quickly things have changed. Only a few days before these same people joined Nehemiah in prayer when danger threatened them. They'd previously seen God take a hand in their affairs so that should have given them confidence about what could do in the future.

But now that they're facing a new kind of threat they're starting to get afraid again. This threat was more subtle than the first threat and it came upon them unsuspectingly.

They had kept a watch over the city walls but they failed to heed what they were hearing so unwittingly they were allowing the enemy to subtly and systematically brainwash them.

They failed to realize that when doubt invades the soul it inevitably leads to despair and when you reach despair failure is only a few steps away.

this really needs to be a reminder to us to be careful about what we allow ourselves to hear. If we spend time allowing our minds to be filled with negativity about whether we can accomplish God's work what do you think is likely to happen?

[16:03] That's why we really need to focus on the promises of God and be encouraged that no matter what happens we can still accomplish God's work for us. In the second section of our passage tonight Nehemiah directly deals with the fear of the people.

He focuses their attention on the reliable resource so we'll see the reliable resource as we look through these verses and look at verses 13 and 14 first Nehemiah writes therefore I position 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 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 Nehemiah knew the strength of this threat but he also knew its limitations above all he knew the strength of God and he was sure that God was on his side we again see here how Nehemiah takes prudent action while he relies on God for the ultimate outcome verse 13 tells us that he armed the people and he also arranged the people in family groups at the most exposed places along the wall dividing them into families corresponded with Israel's traditional way of fighting and it heightened each person's awareness of the stakes

Nehemiah knew that people would fight most fiercely when the lives of their own families were in jeopardy we sometimes hear the mantra let go and let God the example we see more often in scripture is let's go and let God that's L-E-T apostrophe S go and let God scripture is clear that God expects us to take prudent action while at the same time relying on him this is already the second time in tonight's passage where we've seen Nehemiah take specific action while he counts on God to bless the outcome we've discussed the significance of Nehemiah arranging the people in family groups Nehemiah tells us that he also posted a watch and we see that from verse 13 that's equally important Nehemiah set people in strategic places so that they could see any action by the enemy it was important and it's always important in warfare to know quickly when the enemy is making a move if you want to be able to counter that move and neutralize it so locating the people was also important for another reason it was important for the enemy to see the watchers and to know that the people were onto them

Nehemiah's strategy was to post men in conspicuous places so that the enemy would see those men and be deterred from attacking verse 14 is where Nehemiah points people to the reliable resource even that verse makes it clear though that the people should take action if necessary to defend themselves verse 14 says 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 so who is the reliable resource God it almost seems a little soft to just refer to God as a reliable resource you know you kind of think of maybe a reliable car or something like that if you really think about it though God is the only 100% reliable resource that's out there so maybe reliable resource is a decent way to refer to him notice though in verse 14 Nehemiah first rebukes the Jews he says do not be afraid of them then he encourages them with the remember the Lord statement finally he motivates them we can paraphrase that last sentence of verse 14 as fight for the things that you hold dear the Jews had come to Nehemiah with a contrived reason for their inability to continue to build the wall they claimed to be exhausted the real reason might never have surfaced except that Nehemiah was a keen observer of human nature he discerned their uneasiness and looked beyond the rationalization and so he found the real reason which is fear then as a wise leader he tackled the real reason not the rationalization knowing how to diagnose the decline in morale and being able to

effectively to encourage and motivate co-workers whether it's in secular work or in a church is one of the most important factors in successful leadership to do that we have to be in touch with the people that we work with and this is the only way that we can counteract any negative influences that might be going on that means we have to be visible we have to be willing to help others and that means we have to be accessible as well in the society that we have today so many demands are being placed on each one of us that we're all prone to overlook the importance of personal relationships in leadership and we see here that Nehemiah really knew his people and he was in touch with how they felt

[21:54] Nehemiah did more than tell the people to stop being fearful though he also told them why they should have no fear he reminded the people of the God they serve Nehemiah only uses two words to describe God in verse 14 but they're powerful words in the new king james he describes God as great and awesome those words summarize God's power we always need to remember that we serve a great God he is a powerful God and when we focus on the awesome God the enemy is not nearly so awesome anymore sometimes the reasons for our problems seem so great that we forget to focus on the greatness of God when you think about it though in view of God's greatness all of our problems lose their greatness verse 15 gives us the results of Nehemiah's action verse 15 says 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 so when God brought their plot to nothing everybody went back to work so to whom does Nehemiah give the credit for breaking up the plot once again he gives it to the great and awesome God that he referred to in verse 14 so Nehemiah was vigilant armed and ready and he led those of the people to be ready as well but he also led the people to consistently give God the glory for their victories and their successes the great and awesome God came through again and that's an important reminder for us too the immediate threat may be over but Nehemiah knows that he and the workers still need to remain vigilant we've seen the demoralizing dilemma and the reassuring and the reliable resource in verse 16 23 we see the watchful workers the watchful workers the arrangements described in verses 16 23 apply to all of the remaining work on the wall

Nehemiah had a deep trust in God but at the same time he was careful to take all of the precautions that the situation required in verses 16 through 18 Nehemiah wrote these words he said 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 and 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 they held a weapon it's an interesting picture there isn't it every one of the builders had his sword girded at his side me though Nehemiah and the people prayed and trusted God for protection they also kept their weapons close at hand ready to defend themselves from attack

God often accomplishes his purposes through ordinary human means we've seen that truth throughout the passage tonight wise division of duty was made because of the potential of enemy attack at any time Nehemiah needed men who could fight at a therefore some of the workers had to cease working on the walls and stand ready with arms instead this assignment shows the evil effect of opposition to God's work sometimes evil doesn't even have to assault the work of God to hinder it evil people can by their talk and plans force us to give so much time to countering their actions that it actually takes time away from the work that God has called us to do we've already seen that half of the laborers were taken off the work on the walls and they were standing by ready to counter any enemy attack now that we learn that those who labored on the walls also were armed and being well armed to counter enemy attack is a mark of excellent government nations who fail to be adequately armed are only asking for trouble

Nehemiah certainly understood that because being poorly armed makes a group vulnerable to attack being adequately armed is especially important spiritually as well you can never be armed too much spiritually either think about what the apostle Paul said about needing to be armed he described it well in Ephesians verse 6 11 of Ephesians says put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil Paul doesn't say put on just some of the armor or put on the parts that you feel like he says put on the whole armor of God returning to our verses tonight we see that Nehemiah looks like he had a plan for every contingency check out verses 19 and 20 then I said to the nobles the rulers and the rest of the people the work is great and extensive

and we are separated from one another on the wall wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet rally to us there our

[27 : 31] God will fight for us Nehemiah stationed a trumpeter next to him a man who would follow Nehemiah everywhere he went as he supervised the work in case of attack the trumpet blast would rally people to the place of the attack verse 20 suggests that besides Nehemiah's trumpet bearer others probably had different trumpets at the other places along the wall we've talked about how the wall was about two and a half miles long so you likely would have to have other trumpeters stationed around otherwise that one trumpeter would have to have quite a set of lungs to be heard for two and a half miles you'd also have to have good eyes too to be able to spot things for two and a half miles and that's why most people think that Nehemiah's trumpeter was just one of the trumpeters along the wall earlier we saw Nehemiah remind people of the power of God in verse 20 he reminds people about the presence of God their

God was more than powerful their God also was present and their God was ready to use! that power on their behalf just consider how encouraging it had to be for the Jews to know that God would fight for them everybody else seemed to be fighting against them God fighting for them more than compensated for the problem of everybody else fighting against them though verses 21 through 23 summarize the events covered in the chapter they say so we labored in the work and half of the men held the spears from daybreak until the stars appeared 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 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!

time to wash his clothes every so often that's why we have a pretty good idea that we have a nice complete account of what actually happened verse 21 restates the arrangement that we discussed already half the four stood on guard while the other half worked the workers were armed too we talked about how cutting the number of workers in half slowed down the work but Nehemiah had a plan for that the people simply worked longer hours remember back to chapter three we saw that even some ladies worked on the walls if those ladies were still there we can be!

Nehemiah's team though had worked from daybreak until the stars came out and at that time of the year that would have been a lot longer than nine to five we need to notice something else from this verse that may be a little more prudent though to what we can learn from the scripture tonight and that is the fact that the people were able to work so long proves that something other than exhaustion was behind their earlier complaints to Nehemiah you know they talked about how tired they were to him but now we see them working from daybreak to dark verse 22 tells us that Nehemiah required people to stay in the city at night this provided both physical and mental protection for the workers this ensured that all personnel were available in case of an attack it also cut down on the ability of

Sanballat and Tobiah to disseminate their propaganda and discourage the people Nehemiah kept everybody together made it harder for the people to come in and hear what Sanballat and Tobiah were trying to tell them they were going to do true to form we can tell from verse 23 that Nehemiah was there with the people the basic element of Nehemiah's success may be found in his identification with the rest of the Jews he was willing to endure the same deprivation face the same danger and suffer the same hardships he was one with them in the work the temporary setback didn't deter him he was always moving forward Nehemiah and his guard were examples to the rest so continuously were they on duty that they did not so much as remove their clothes except for washing it was a time to try men's souls but the testing only proved how zealously committed to a good thing were the governor and his helpers they really shine as a pattern for us bidding us to hold fast to what

[32 : 35] God has committed us to do when a difficult situation arose Nehemiah faced it objectively he was sensitive to the needs of those within Jerusalem as well as to the plots and schemes of those outside Jerusalem he may have regretted the slowdown of the building program but he faced each situation realistically he reordered his priorities and adjusted his strategy accordingly neither the pressure nor the tension caused him to deviate from his ultimate objective the basic foundation of Nehemiah's life was in his faith his faith was the vital seed which inspired others and proved a harvest of accomplishments because of this faith he was able to motivate the Jews he knew that to give up was to count God out God had allowed Sanballat and the others to oppose the work but should

Nehemiah doubt God's providence he knew that God was eventually going to bring them through it so he really shouldn't doubt the way that God had chosen to bring them through it doubt is a one way street that leads to failure faith on the other hand creates a positive expectation which Nehemiah was sure would culminate in the realization of his plans Nehemiah's faith also became the ground for his confidence it gave him the courage to persevere he had the confidence that what he was doing was what God wanted done as a result he could rise above the disturbing conflicts which surrounded him Nehemiah's faith in the one who had called him to undertake this task also gave him enthusiasm that enthusiasm helped him turn a potentially disastrous situation into a unifying situation without enthusiasm the greatest plans in the world are subject to failure with enthusiasm no task is too great and no opposition too formidable as a result of Nehemiah's enthusiasm the tired fearful workers were motivated to accomplish what seemed to all intents and purposes to be impossible enthusiasm is not a magical something that we either have or have not it's based on two important qualities it's based on truth and character Nehemiah was committed to the truth and by following the truth he developed the quality of character so necessary in a capable leader when he came to Jerusalem he was able to make truth of what God wanted for his people the focus of a common purpose and his character became the important dynamic which inspired the Jews to follow him with confidence and we can tell that they were inspired to follow him with confidence because they did it over and over in the face of opposition effective leadership is based upon both of these qualities truth and character that's a great pattern for us when we're faced with opposition from the lesson tonight we see prayer and persistence we see faith and hard work Nehemiah had many good traits he was a leader even by worldly standards what made him really great was his faith in God and his assurance that the God who had given him the task of rebuilding the wall would stand by him until that rebuilding was done the apostle Paul wrote that God keeps out his work until the job is done remember Philippians 1 6 Philippians 1 6 says being confident of this very thing that he who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Christ Jesus we should know from that and other verses that God will enable us to carry out our work to its completion too faith can give us the confidence to approach each new day with reliance upon the Lord the thrill and challenge which came to Nehemiah should be ours as well when we realize that we're vitally involved in God's work from the passage tonight we learn to expect opposition even when we're doing

God's will we learn to develop positive responses to that opposition and those positive responses include prayer and our identification with God and his purpose and we learn to persevere with the task at hand think about what the Jews would have missed out on if they didn't see the opportunity for God to work and if they hadn't witnessed what God did to bring the opposition to nothing do you think they thought they alone were responsible for scaring the opposition away actually God showed them by how he scared the opposition away and brought the opposition to not that God really is a God who is faithful to fight their battles and that same God is faithful to fight our battles too faith is always the vital ingredient though it led Nehemiah through the valley of despair and translated his efforts into noble achievements the secret of his success can become ours too think about what

[38:03] John wrote in 1 John 5 4 he said this is the victory that overcomes the world even our faith that's important there he doesn't say even a faith he says even our faith it's not faith in anything it's faith in a specific thing that's what's important that last clause that I read from John of course comes from 1 John 5 4 and here is the!

says for whatever is born of God overcomes the world and this is the victory that has overcome the world our faith