

NEHEMIAH

Lesson 6, Chapter 4

<sup>CJB</sup> Psalm 2:1 *Why are the nations in an uproar, the peoples grumbling in vain?*

<sup>2</sup> *The earth's kings are taking positions, leaders conspiring together, against ADONAI and his anointed*

<sup>3</sup> *They cry, "Let's break their fetters! Let's throw off their chains!"*

<sup>4</sup> *He who sits in heaven laughs; Adonai looks at them in derision.*

<sup>5</sup> *Then in his anger he rebukes them, terrifies them in his fury.*

<sup>6</sup> *"I myself have installed my king on Tziyon, my holy mountain."*

<sup>7</sup> *"I will proclaim the decree: ADONAI said to me, 'You are my son; today I became your father.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance; the whole wide world will be your possession*

<sup>9</sup> *You will break them with an iron rod, shatter them like a clay pot.'*

<sup>10</sup> *Therefore, kings, be wise; be warned, you judges of the earth.*

<sup>11</sup> *Serve ADONAI with fear; rejoice, but with trembling.*

<sup>12</sup> *Kiss the son\*, lest he be angry, and you perish along the way, when suddenly his anger blazes. How blessed are all who take refuge in him.*

Psalms 2 captures both the earthly political circumstances and the spiritual reality of the situation that we are peering in upon as we read the history of Nehemiah and his determination to rebuild the walls and the city of Jerusalem despite the outrage expressed by the enemies of

the Jews. Since the end of Chapter 2 we have watched as local and regional political leaders, gentiles of course, have steadily upped the ante of pressure and threats as they oppose the mission that Nehemiah was sent to accomplish by King Artaxerxes; a mission that, behind the scenes, was achieving God's will. But why are these various potentates that surround Judah and Jerusalem so against something as normal and typical and necessary as rebuilding the once formidable defensive walls of Jerusalem? Almost every city of consequence throughout the Middle East had defensive walls. In fact, in general, walls were requirement number 1 to even be classified as a city.

The precise political reasons for their immovable stance against the Jews rebuilding Jerusalem aren't stated, but Nehemiah seemed to have understood the enemy's mindset quite well, which led him to say to Sanballat, Toubiah and Geshem: "But you have no share, right, or history to commemorate in Jerusalem". In other words, those leaders assumed that they had some kind of inherent right to lord over Jerusalem. By studying documents written from that era, it is not hard to piece together the reality that the farther from the power center at Shushan, the capital of the Persian Empire, that a province lay, the harder it was for the Persian King to control it. And so it was easier for a local ruler to explore his ambitions of expanding his power base and reach a bit beyond what the King of Persia had legally authorized. Kings and governors hold those offices for a reason: they love the prestige and they desire the power and control (and usually the more the better). So when they see an opening to expand their rule to a nearby population center the temptation is often too much to resist.

But this still doesn't answer the question as to why they detested the Jews as a people. It's one thing to want to conquer a territory for the sake of wanting more power; it's another to harbor a deep-seated hatred for its indigenous population. And for this, there seems to be no rational reason. When I read Nehemiah I feel as if I'm reading today's Jerusalem Post newspaper. I know that the Arab nations surrounding Israel can't tolerate the thought of a tiny Jewish nation existing in their midst; but why? What about the Jews is so distasteful? What are the Jews doing to them? Do the Jews have designs on expanding their territory to absorb Jordan, or Syria, or Lebanon? Or on lording over the region? Do they plan to convert Muslims to Judaism? The answer to all of these questions is, so far as anyone knows, no. As it was with Sanballat, Toubiah and Geshem, so it is today with all the Arab speaking nations surrounding Israel; the reasons for why they despise Israel and the Jewish people so violently escapes defining. And Psalm 2, which I read to open and set the tone for today's study, rather well captures the sense of a mysterious hatred towards God's Kingdom land and people since time immemorial by asking the simple rhetorical question: "**Why** are the nations (meaning gentile nations) in an uproar, the peoples grumbling in vain?" And the true reason is that they are Satan's proxies fighting against the God of Israel, and therefore against His people and His plan of redemption, even if they don't consciously realize it.

As we ended chapter 3 last week, Nehemiah had organized teams of Jews to work together on well defined sections of the wall that each team had chosen to take the responsibility to restore. Smaller families adopted small wall sections to rebuild; larger families, numerous members of nearby towns, even professional trade guilds chose larger sections to reconstruct. The reconstruction was progressing rapidly to the point that it caught the attention and drew the ire of Sanvalat, Tovyah and Geshem; they became furious and probably not just a little embarrassed. These Jews they thought so little of were moving in lightening fashion to accomplish what seemed impossible. Thus the 3 gentile rulers increased their campaign of ridicule and veiled threats, trying to derail what to them was an oncoming train. However despite their interference, the wall sections were soon joined together so that there were no longer gaps in the protection, and this happened because (as says the final words to end chapter 3), “the people worked with a will”.

Let's read Chapter 4 together.

### READ NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 4 all

The opening statement of verse 1 sets the context for this chapter. As I mentioned earlier, the local and regional governors were intensely unhappy that the Jews were merrily humming along, showing an amazing degree of solidarity, energy and skill, and completing the reconstruction of the walls of Jerusalem at an astounding pace. Why so angry? No reason is given other than the rebuilding by the Jews was against their collective wills. But this time there is a 4<sup>th</sup> gentile leader added to the group of upset gentile rulers. We don't get a name, only that he governed the **Ashdodim**; that is, the people of the province of Ashdod. Yes, this is generally the same Ashdod that exists today as part of Israel, in which Seed of Abraham Ministries owns and operates a teaching center where the Bible is taught to the Jewish people in Hebrew.

Ashdod was the newer name for what had been at one time a region called Philistia.

Apparently this change of names occurred because the king of Ashdod, one of the 5 Philistine city states, had become the most dominant of the 5. So the **Ashdodim** were still the Philistines, just by a different name. So now we have 4 outraged rulers who intend to do something about these Jews having the nerve to rebuild their own city, in their own province, without the approval or assistance of their neighbors. This passage truly feels like back to the future. Let's identify each of the 4, and the modern names for these same places and people. Sanvalat occupied what today the world calls the West Bank; or what is more correctly called Samaria. Today the West Bank Palestinians led by the terrorist Fatah regime occupies this region.

Next is Toviya of the Ammonites. Today Ammon is the Kingdom of Jordan on the east bank of the Jordan River, ruled by King Abdullah.

The next group mentioned is the Arabs, and their leader is Geshem. The Arabs occupied an area that stretched from what today is called the Negev to the Arabian Peninsula. Today Israel occupies the Negev, but the Arab Saud family owns and controls the region that we know better as Saudi Arabia.

After that is the unnamed ruler of Ashdod, the one time region of Philistia. Today Ashdod is a Jewish port city, but the remainder of former Philistine territory is contained in the infamous Gaza Strip. The Gaza people are another and separate faction of so-called Palestinians who are ruled by the terrorist group Hamas.

So here in Nehemiah we see that Judah was completely surrounded by enemies. Sanvalat ruled Samaria to the north. Toviya ruled (or perhaps represented) Ammon to the east. Geshem ruled Arabia to the south, and the unnamed Philistine ruler ruled Ashdod to the west. And now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century A.D., Israel is surrounded by the West Bank Palestinians to the north, Jordan to the east, Saudi Arabia (and Egypt) to the south, and Gaza to the west. Amazing. Where else on this planet has so little changed over the last 2500 years? So, if we want to better understand what comes next in chapter 4 (pressure, fear, and intimidation of Nehemiah's Jews), it is easier to identify with since we can see on TV everyday the identical situation that faces modern Israel. And what was Judah's and now Israel's response to their unfriendly neighbors who constantly harassed, attacked, and threatened them? They built a defensive wall. And what was their neighbors' reaction to the wall? The same today as what

we read here in Nehemiah: indignation, anger, and homicidal threats from the enemies. And exactly what danger or risk does a defensive wall pose to a neighboring people or nation? None. It just makes the hostile intent of those neighbors upon Israel far more difficult to bring about. And that is why the 4 rulers in Nehemiah's day were so angry, and it is why Israel's enemies today are angry at Israel's successful construction of a perimeter wall of protection.

And, in verse 2, not surprisingly the gang of 4 decided that they would attack Jews in Jerusalem in retribution, with the goal of disrupting the wall building. Scholars regularly debate whether the planned attack was a bluff or fully intended; I don't know and it really doesn't matter because the result was the same. My opinion is that they probably intended to commit terrorist-like acts and continue day and night pressure to foment trouble, but not to wage an all out battle using soldiers because in the end these 4 rulers were part of the Persian Empire and King Artaxerxes was their sovereign, just as he was Nehemiah's sovereign. But King Artaxerxes had given Nehemiah his personal blessing and help to rebuild Jerusalem, and so it's hard to imagine that these 4 enemies would completely disregard the King's orders and commit to war. On the other hand, it is certainly possible that since the entire point of rebuilding Jerusalem (from the King's perspective) was to provide a military fort for a substantial Persian presence to control the southern part of the Persian Empire (something these 4 rulers obviously did not want), that the Persian King at this stage may not have been able to do much about these gentile rulers thwarting his plan. And there is one other factor at play; when this same king, Artaxerxes, many years earlier had sent Ezra to re-establish the Law of Moses among the Jewish people of Judah, Ezra also started to rebuild the city of Jerusalem. The local gentile rulers complained to Artaxerxes and he indeed ordered Ezra to halt the work.

### **Ezra 4:21-23 CJB**

***<sup>21</sup> "So now, order that these men stop work and that this city not be rebuilt until I order it.***

***<sup>22</sup> Take care not to neglect your duty; otherwise the harm may increase, to the damage of the king."***

***<sup>23</sup> When the text of King Artach'shashta's letter was read before Rechum, Shimshai the secretary and their colleagues, they hurried to Yerushalayim to the Judeans and stopped their work by force of arms.***

So perhaps the gang of 4 hoped that if enough trouble broke out, and enough innocent blood was shed and the whole region was in danger of destabilization, then Artaxerxes would have second thoughts about it, stop the wall construction and order his cupbearer to return home.

What was Nehemiah's response to this new challenge? He led the Jews in prayer; and then he acted! He no doubt didn't know for certain (anymore than we do) whether this threat was only bluster or a real attack was coming. So as the only prudent course, he set watchmen on the walls to keep alert. This was Nehemiah's typical way of approaching every challenge; approaching God in prayer followed by decisive action. But next we read that the people of Judah were also beginning to lose their zeal for the project. The constant intimidation, the difficult working conditions, the men having to leave their home towns and be away from their families and away from their farming activities in order to build the wall, and the daunting and physically exhausting task they were facing even if they had had no opposition, was finally taking its toll. So much so that a pessimistic jingle popped up among the workers and began to circulate that said: "The strength of the people who carry loads away is starting to fail, and there is so much rubble that we can't build the wall". Just as an aside, this verse structure is called the *qinah*, or lament, and it has a uniquely identifiable rhythm in Hebrew that vanishes once it is translated into other languages such as English. That many gentile Bible scholars don't seem to know this has led to all sorts of interesting translations of this passage that miss the point entirely. And the point is that the Jewish people were discouraged even before the threat of attacks became elevated. So what we have here is a quickly deteriorating situation accompanied by discontent; the experienced leader Nehemiah knows he has to nip this in the bud or the project is doomed to fail just as all other earlier attempts had failed. In fact, in verse 6 we learn that Judeans that lived nearby (no doubt family of the workers), came to Jerusalem in a steady stream pleading with their loved ones to return home. And this had everything to do with the rising tensions; the fear of not knowing what these 4 gentile rulers might do, plus as we'll examine shortly, the very real prospect of running out of food from the fields, vineyards and orchards because they couldn't be properly tended.

Verse 7 is problematic because as it is transmitted to us from the most ancient Hebrew Scripture we have, it is not intelligible. There are obvious copyist errors. So about the best we can do is to speculate based on the context that surrounds the verse. But the gist of it is that this is part of the response of Nehemiah to the danger of attack as well as the discouragement of the Jewish people. So in a kind of kill-two-birds-with-one-stone maneuver, he stationed his men at strategically important locations around the wall perimeter as a precaution. It is nearly impossible to know what strategic purpose it served to place people at the lowest points of the wall, when it is always the high ground that is most advantageous in battle. So we kind of need

to move on and understand that regardless of the details the goal was to make a show of force by gathering the people together as a battle unit.

In ancient times, even during the era of the Kings, while there were indeed fulltime professional soldiers and officers that formed a standing army, it was usually comparatively modest in size. And this is because when larger forces were needed the civilian males of the community or kingdom formed a reserve militia. Then the professional soldiers would be used mainly to train, organize, and lead the militia. This is essentially what we see happening here in Nehemiah. We know that Nehemiah came to Jerusalem with a military escort so probably they were tasked to stay with Nehemiah as his personal body guard. The result of this move by Nehemiah is that the people of Judah, when gathered together, gained courage as happens when we are with others of like mind and purpose. And when the enemy saw the preparations for battle (which Nehemiah intended for them to see), they quickly understood that they would not easily take Jerusalem or succeed in a surprise attack.

This, along with other actions of Nehemiah, provides marvelously good and practical instruction for modern day Believers, too many of us having fallen into a passive pattern of earnestly praying but then standing aside when the enemy (fleshly or spiritual) attacks, assuming its up to God to take care of business. Paul taught us how to prepare and cautioned against fear and passivity using familiar military war metaphors to get his point across. Not much point to prepare if one is going to leave it to the other guy to deal with the enemy.

### **Ephesians 6:10-18 CJB**

**<sup>10</sup> Finally, grow powerful in union with the Lord, in union with his mighty strength!**

**<sup>11</sup> Use all the armor and weaponry that God provides, so that you will be able to stand against the deceptive tactics of the Adversary.**

**<sup>12</sup> For we are not struggling against human beings, but against the rulers, authorities and cosmic powers governing this darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realm.**

***<sup>13</sup> So take up every piece of war equipment God provides; so that when the evil day comes, you will be able to resist; and when the battle is won, you will still be standing.***

***<sup>14</sup> Therefore, stand! Have the belt of truth buckled around your waist, put on righteousness for a breastplate,***

***<sup>15</sup> and wear on your feet the readiness that comes from the Good News of shalom.***

***<sup>16</sup> Always carry the shield of trust, with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the Evil One.***

***<sup>17</sup> And take the helmet of deliverance; along with the sword given by the Spirit, that is, the Word of God;***

***<sup>18</sup> as you pray at all times, with all kinds of prayers and requests, in the Spirit, vigilantly and persistently, for all God's people.***

Look at verse 14. The purpose of preparing for battle in union with the Lord is, as Paul says in verse 14, to run away from the fight as fast as we can, right? Is that what he says? Or does Paul say to quit and let someone else fight for you? Or to sit and watch? No; Paul says all this preparation is so that we STAND! Folks, our walk with God is not necessarily a peaceful saunter in the Garden of Eden. If we want to be more participant than spectator, then we will face risk, danger, and getting dirty and bruised. Prayer is so very important and indispensable. But prayer is only part of the preparation for battle; only when we are directly fighting spirits is the prayer itself also the battle plan. At all other times, when we are facing human enemies who are being led by evil spiritual forces, we must stand and do battle.

Might Paul have taken his cue from Nehemiah? I think so.

Nehemiah, the great leader that he is, after gathering his people and putting them in battle order, addresses them. He encourages them by using the most powerful motivation known to



humans: fighting for those dearest to you. The time for prayer and contemplation has come and gone; now its time for the rubber to hit the road. Don't be afraid he tells them, rather it is Yehoveh who is to be feared, not the enemy. Fight to protect your children, your wives, your fellow brethren, and your homes.

So, records Nehemiah in verse 9, when the 4 rulers heard and saw that the Jews were prepared to do battle this frustrated their plans; they figured they had a cakewalk ahead of them. But just as prayer was but preparation so was the organizing of the men and their show of force but preparation. Each and every day from here forward they would have to be alert, watchful, and ready to fight at a moment's notice. We are given some detail about just how the defensive precautions were organized. It was that half of "my men" would work on the wall and the other half would patrol fully armed. The reference to "my men" (*ne'aray* in Hebrew) isn't referring to the Jewish workers in general, but rather to a specific group (probably those soldiers who had escorted Nehemiah from Shushan to Jerusalem). Note how they had spears, bows, and armor, all things that to be effective the men had to be thoroughly trained in and practiced at. And while these were rather standard light infantry weapons for that time, armor was expensive and not used by the militia. Also note how the leaders, referring to the military officers, stood to the rear and back from the work the laborers were doing. Their job was to control the forces, constantly assess the situation, and be ready to deploy their men and the militia for battle if necessary.

But the workers on the wall were not exempt from being part of the battle. They had to carry swords on their thighs as they carried loads of rubble away, and lifted huge stones into place. A plan was devised so that a man with a shofar was always next to Nehemiah. Thus if the city was attacked, Nehemiah would order the shofar player to sound the alarm and call everyone to the place where it was blown. After all, people were spread out all along thousands of feet of walls, each group restoring their section, and attack could come anywhere along the wall.

But Nehemiah took another rather extreme precaution; he had the entire workforce sleep in Jerusalem. This move accomplished a number of objectives both practical and strategic. It protected the workers from harm; eating and staying together as a group promotes camaraderie; it allowed the largest possible force to be ready to repel any attack; it allowed for shifts of watchmen to operate 24 hours a day; it saved time so that folks didn't travel back and forth between Jerusalem and their nearby villages; and people being people, it didn't allow some to drift away when the going got the toughest. In fact, at least a major portion of the people never took off their outer garments to sleep at night; they slept completely clothed so that they could spring into action at a moments notice.

Let's pause and reflect for a moment because there is an important underlying principle that we would do well to think upon deeply. All this points towards something that goes back to our first two study lessons on the Book of Nehemiah: this man was a well trained leader who was raised up for "just such a time as this" and he answered God's call. He understood basic military tactics, he knew how to plan and organize, and he was a natural leader who acted with authority and confidence. His position as part of the King's royal court at the power center of Persia had made him wise in the ways of politics and he understood the minds and ambitions of rulers and potentates and how to deal with them; sometimes diplomatically, and at other times with brute force of arms. And as an obedient worshipper and follower of the God of Israel he led in a Godly way, caring for the well being of his people, as a shepherd, above himself. He was trained in the Torah by Ezra, so he knew and followed God's Laws and commandments. He respected all humanity, but he also put his own people, the Jews, above the other nations and knew that they were a specially chosen and separated people of God.

This knowledge was a rarity for his time as the true religion of the Bible had given way to early Judaism and its mix of Biblical law with manmade religious traditions that better accommodated the evolving political correctness and desires of the people. Nehemiah was intelligent, full of self control, dynamic, fearless in the face of the enemy, and an obedient and humble servant to the Lord. For me, this is the model that a believing leader in the Kingdom of God ought to emulate. And such leadership is vitally needed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century when Christianity and the Jewish people are under attack (within and without) not seen since perhaps the days of Nero. Such leadership, especially in the Church, is at the moment in short supply, and the people are asleep. But even good leaders can do nothing if the people are too fearful or indifferent to arm themselves and fight. We must rid ourselves of our passivity, fear, and willful ignorance of God's Word and instead acknowledge that while we are so greatly privileged to live in a time that the Prophets of old would have given anything to experience, a great responsibility goes with it. And that responsibility is to stand up and be counted, to comfort and defend God's chosen people Israel, to get our hands dirty to do God's work on this earth, and to reform that which has gone terribly astray among God's people; that is, within Christianity and Judaism (no matter how unpopular that might be). Look around you; I mean that literally. I ask you to fight the good fight for the sake of those around you; fight for the spiritual and physical lives of your spouses, your children, your homes and your nation and your Believing community. It **is** under attack. If you won't stand after being alerted, who will? Let us agree to be as Nehemiah and the restorers of Jerusalem, and like the coming Tribulation Saints of the End of Days who put aside self interest to go against the Anti-Christ when the last remaining Believers alive finally understand that we have always been in a battle to the death since the day God separated Abraham and his future descendants from all others on this planet. It's only that most of our brethren and our leadership has decided to sit it out and hope for the best.

If you can hear this message then the Lord is calling you.....He is calling **us**.....as the days of history countdown to a close; He is calling us to be builders AND warriors. Will you answer the call?

Next week, chapter 5.