

NEHEMIAH 4

Building progress despite attacks

Nehemiah 4
The LORD causes the rebuilding
of the wall of Jerusalem to continue
despite the very real danger of an enemy attack

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Introduction: Last week we saw how the people of Jerusalem and Judah, the returned exiles, began rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem. We saw how it was truly a *communal* effort, how (almost) everyone became involved, and how the work began to progress.

In chapter 4, however, we read of the beginning of opposition to the work of rebuilding. We also read how Nehemiah handles this very difficult situation. Again, focusing on the entire chapter, we can only point to some highlights, some key elements. What we then see is this:

The LORD causes the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem to continue despite the very real danger of an enemy attack.

We will give attention to two elements:

- 1. the decisive first line of defence.**
- 2. the subsequent measures of defence.**

1. What we read here this morning is, of course, related to a specific, historical situation. Today we live in a different society and environment. Nevertheless, one matter has not changed but has intensified: Satan's hatred of the church of Christ and his relentless effort to have the upbuilding and gathering of the church obstructed and stopped. And we have to face this reality and deal with it on a daily basis.

When the people began to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and at first made quite a bit of progress, things looked well. The people involved were undoubtedly encouraged that the LORD was blessing them so richly. The initial enthusiasm carried them onward, and the basic structure of the wall began to take form. Mind you, they had a long way to go, for they had to start almost everywhere from the ground up, but the results were immediately visible. That was encouraging.

But then there is a change. We read again about Sanballat, the governor of Samaria, and Tobiah the Ammonite. They are truly livid about this attempt of the Jews to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Now we can keep this on a human level and say: from a political angle, this reaction was to be expected. A power struggle was inevitable. Perhaps. But we must dig deeper, for here is more than a political angle: this is at bottom a *spiritual* struggle. If God wants the city to be rebuilt, Satan wants to prevent it at all costs. The gathering of the church, in all places and throughout all times, meets with determined satanic resistance. What we can learn here is how God's people deal with this resistance. The events written here are not merely descriptive, but also normative. God shows us the way to deal with such critical situations of determined enemy resistance.

There are a number of "devices" (methods) which Satan uses whenever he tries to prevent the building and upbuilding of the church of Christ. Perhaps the first device is the one first mentioned here also (verses 1 – 3), that of *ridicule*. Few things hit as deep as "ridicule." Here you are, doing something that is not easy, and another comes along and laughs at it, derides your effort and makes the whole undertaking seem silly. The effect can be that those who are at the

receiving end of the ridicule will also take another look at their striving, feel stupid, and cease what they are doing.

Ridicule is hard to take. It makes us look like fools, and we are sensitive to that awful feeling. When others make fun of you, you can be deeply hurt and offended. This is true especially when there is a kernel of truth in what is being said. As is the case in this chapter.

Sanballat is having fun at the Jews' attempt to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. I think that he may have called a meeting in Samaria, for we read in verse 2 that he makes his remarks "in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria"! Perhaps there was a military parade, with a banquet afterwards where the officials and the officers gathered, and where Sanballat made this "humorous" little speech about the attempt of the Jews. A show of force is combined with a show of disdain.

What does Sanballat say? He speaks about those "feeble Jews," a very derogatory statement. Who do these Jews think they are? Will they really be able to restore the wall? They sure will have to offer a lot of sacrifices to a "god" who has deserted them. Sanballat has noticed that the Jews quite suddenly started this rebuilding and are in haste to complete it, and he scoffs, "Will they finish in a day"? This might mean as much as: they will not last even one day at this work. Why not? Because most of the stones are reduced to rubble, smashed, burned, blackened. It is an impossible task to restore that wall. Silly Jews with their pipe dreams; they'll soon quit building.

And his buddy, Tobiah the Ammonite, adds a touch of humour himself. He says (verse 3): "What they are building – if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break their wall of stones." Now a fox is a very light and fleet-footed animal. But Tobiah laughs: even a fox could make this wall crumble and fall. And I imagine that everyone roared with laughter at the expense of those silly Jews.

And there is some truth to what these two are saying. It is an almost impossible task. The material is damaged, the effort to rebuild will take too long. From the human perspective it cannot be done and it is foolish even to try. The Jews may start enthusiastically, but they will

soon realize how difficult and impossible the enterprise is. At this point Sanballat and Tobiah can still afford to joke about it. Ridicule is okay for the moment.

A passage like this makes you (again) aware of how the world looks at the people of God and their efforts; how they regard the time and energy that we put into church building and kingdom work. They consider it a waste of time, a doomed venture, one that yields no profit, one that we will inevitably have to stop because it just doesn't work.

What is now the reaction of Nehemiah to these insults? He had imperial cavalry at his command, remember, and he could muster a sizeable group of men to come up with a show of force himself. Nehemiah could have organized his own little parade and delivered a powerful speech. Tit for tat, as they say. Beat them at their own game.

But what we read is something quite different: it is simply a prayer. This is apparently the church's first line of defence. Before anything else is done, a prayer is offered to the LORD, the God of Israel. And again we are shown through Nehemiah's ministry that a man of action must be a man of prayer. You cannot build a church if your line of communication with the Head of the church is not always and constantly open.

It does not say where the prayer is held. It is mentioned without further introduction. But it is a communal prayer, for notice how it says in verse 4: Hear *us*, O our God . . ." It could very well be, as some suggest, that Nehemiah had all the workers along the wall stop with their labour, and that all joined together in prayer.

The content of the prayer is simple. There is first a description of the attitude of the enemy: we are despised. The enemy looks down on the people of Israel with deep and relentless contempt. Their words are insulting to the Jews, who are described as feeble, spineless idiots.

And what does the prayer really ask? That God Himself intervene. That He turn the insults back on the heads of the enemy; that, instead, their land be plundered. It is also remarkable that the Israelites beg God not to overlook the enemy's sin but to punish it severely: do not cover up their guilt, or blot out their sins from your sight.

Now we can ask ourselves many questions here. Is this a proper prayer? May we be so vindictive when we pray about our enemies? Most explainers will tell you that this is really typical Old Testament language, like the psalms of wrath, when God is asked to mete out instant and severe measures of punishment, but that such can no longer be the prayer of the New Testament Church. Now, we are told, we must ask that the enemy be forgiven and that they may see the error of their ways, and repent. How could we today still ask God to curse our enemies?

Did not the Lord Jesus Himself command us (Luke 6 : 27): “But I tell you who hear me: love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for (not against!) those who mistreat you.” And Paul also taught, “Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse . . .” (Romans 12 : 14). Therefore many explainers are stuck with the Old Testament prayers and psalms that contain curses, and they say: this is not applicable anymore.

What to say about this? Not much, really. In Bible times – as well as today – we are easily filled with thoughts of personal revenge. We will get back at those who have so deeply offended us. So we go on a personal vendetta, a private hate campaign. This is what the Bible forbids in both the Old and New Testament. It is another thing, however, when ungodly and unbelieving people unite to attack the church of Christ and hinder the progress of the Gospel. Then we may – and must – ask the LORD to intervene and act swiftly and justly. There is no personal element here; rather an asking for vindication by the Lord so that His work may continue.

Christ prayed in that fashion. He said to Capernaum, the city that rejected Him: “And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down *to the depths*” (Luke 10 : 15). The depths – literally it says “Hades,” and this can mean hell. That is a curse if I ever heard one. In the New Testament, as in the Old Testament, it is true: wherever the Gospel is resisted and rejected en masse, where opposition is organized and hate campaigns are encouraged, there the judgment, the curse of God may and must be invoked.

Let us remember this, for there are many Christians in the world who are sorely persecuted, and who will help them, except the Lord? Who prays for their vindication, except the holy catholic church? Who ardently longs for the downfall of Christ's and our enemies, if not the church of Christ, also today? Do you know how in many countries today – I think especially of Muslim countries – Christians are despised and have no rights? Shall we not ask God to vindicate and deliver these brothers and sisters? Their hope is our prayerful support.

But to return to our text. We notice that Nehemiah and the Israelites are not bothered by the show of force organized by Sanballat and Tobiah. They all continue building. Look at verse 6: "So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart." The insults of the enemies only spurred on the Jews to build in an even more dedicated and urgent manner! We always build against impossible odds, and we do so because indeed our heart is in it.

This is the key criterion for builders. Your heart must be in it. That means: it must be a matter of faith-commitment. That faith will often be tested, but it does carry you through. And so the wall continues to grow until it is half-way finished. The power of prayer proves stronger than the intimidations and insults of the enemy. Pray and work: this has always been the most successful formula of the church of the Lord.

2. But this sustained effort of the wall-builders only serves to aggravate the wrath of Sanballat and his allies. What else would you expect? The verses 7 and 8 tell us about a conspiracy to mount a surprise attack against Jerusalem and its builders. Please notice that this conspiracy attracts a growing number of allies. Sanballat (and the Samaritans) in the north, Tobiah and the Ammonites in the east, Geshem and the Arabs in the south are joined by the Philistines in the west, the men of Ashdod. When you look at this you will admit that Judah faces a formidable foe: it is surrounded, outnumbered. It is also poorly-equipped. If it comes to a military campaign, the Jews appear doomed. The second device of Satan is bolder than the first one, that of ridicule: now he prepares for active opposition, a sudden strike against the builders.

But the builders do not cease their work. The wall grows, the gaps are being closed (notice this important little detail in the text), and we read in verse 9: "But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat." The first line of defense is still prayer. But also an additional measure is taken: we posted a guard, a 24-hour watch. This means that men were stationed around the city night and day who would warn the builders of any advancing troops and prevent a surprise attack which could result in a swift massacre.

We posted a guard. It seems senseless and ineffective. What can such a guard do, except, maybe, give some advance warning? These guards will not be able to repel an attack, nor will the city be a refuge, for the walls are still not secure and the gates are not properly in place.

It is not surprising then that we notice another development in this chapter. In the verses 10-12 we read how the people of Judah are beginning to get discouraged. This is the third device of Satan: lead God's people to discouragement, a feeling that the work will never be completed.

The first discouragement is a result of the fact that the strength of the workers is giving out. Long hours, hard labour, not enough rest – it is too much. And there seems to be no end to the rubble. Perhaps parts of the rebuilt wall were still so weak that they indeed constantly caved in and had to be repaired. The work is getting too much!

Moreover, the enemy is becoming bolder all the time. They spread rumours about an impending surprise attack. At any moment they can swoop down on the unsuspecting builders and kill them. The enemy openly says this: we will wage a campaign to the death and all builders will be killed.

We read that this has a strongly discouraging effect as well. Verse 12: "Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over: wherever you turn, they will attack us." These are the Jews who lived near and perhaps among the Gentiles. They know firsthand of the strength and determination of the enemy. They know that there is no way of escape once a full-scale war begins. And they are the most vulnerable, the first ones who will be killed. Therefore they lose heart.

It says that they sent delegations to Jerusalem “ten times over.” This means constantly and repeatedly! Every day there is some group of Jews from the countryside wanting to talk to Nehemiah, asking him to stop the building of the wall. These people are really afraid and completely discouraged.

I imagine that the whole atmosphere in and around Jerusalem began to sour. The workers are exhausted and perhaps short-tempered. The people around are frightened. Israel is demoralized, has lost courage, and for many their heart is not in it anymore. They have given it their best shot, but the best is not good enough. A classic opportunity for the devil to move in.

Satan has followed several strategies: he has scoffed at the people, raised a strong coalition against them, and now he has discouraged them. And this last element of discouragement is perhaps the most effective. Once you believe that something can't be done, you tend to quit and let things go. Satan likes us to believe that there are more obstacles than opportunities. In church life, and also in our personal lives. He accentuates the negatives and blocks out the positives and robs us of a healthy outlook and a constant hope. Yes, Satan's prime goal is to make us believe that everything we did was in vain, for naught.

Sometimes you see it, also today, that sincere people, who have given much time and energy for the building of the church of Christ, simply become discouraged and give up. They cannot hack it anymore. There are too many obstacles and not enough opportunities. This can happen to office bearers and other members alike. We may even begin to doubt the power of prayer. For we have prayed and worked, but nothing came of it. Rather than getting better the situation has gotten worse. Then a feeling of despair sets in, and people withdraw into themselves.

The devil likes nothing better than to discourage you. It is a great victory for him when you give up or opt out. This is true in our personal struggles and in our church life. We become side-lined. We are spectators, who are amused at the ongoing efforts of others. We are convinced that it is futile. And there is this mood: Lord, leave me alone, I've had it. The world is full of discouraged and frustrated people. But

may this be true in the church of Christ? Where He has poured out His Spirit over His people and given us assurances of His deliverance?

Besides ongoing prayer, Nehemiah takes some further measures. We read of this in the latter part of the chapter. For prayer does not exclude thoughtful effort. You may ask God to bless, only if you indeed keep working. God doesn't bless couch-potatoes.

Nehemiah's measures are simple. There is no ingenious plan, no master strategy. He posts some of the people behind the lowest points in the wall, the most vulnerable spots. He actually does this by families (verse 13; did you notice that?). Perhaps the reason for this is that people will give their utmost and stand their ground for their families, their own flesh and blood. Also, in this way one does not have to worry where other family members are if a battle should break out.

In verse 14 we read how Nehemiah looks things over. He inspects the new arrangement. I guess that it didn't look very encouraging. It is rather inadequate, a stop-gap measure. But Nehemiah says: "Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes." They cannot win on their own, it is clear. All defensive measures are inadequate on their own. But: remember the Lord! That is the battle cry of God's children. He can do what is humanly-speaking impossible. He is a God of great and awesome deeds. Believe that. For the Lord there are no hopeless situations! In that faith fight for all that is dear to you.

Remember the Lord! O, how I wish that we would take these words to heart every day in all the circumstances and problems that we face. It is so easy to calculate God out of the picture – and how often do we not leave Him out of the equation? Then our church work does not go beyond the level of a human effort, and that is doomed to fail. Remember the Lord!

The enemy learned that their plan for a surprise attack would not work. The Jews were armed and prepared to fight to the finish. So they ceased their effort. But Nehemiah did not see this as an opportunity to relax vigilance. We read in verse 16, "From that day on . . ." Certain

measures were taken. His own men were divided into two groups: one half doing the work, the other half keeping an armed watch. The officers were everywhere to boost morale and make sure no one left his post. The ones who had to carry material had weapons in one hand. The ones who needed both hands to build the wall still had a sword at their side. And Nehemiah had a trumpet bearer constantly with him. If an attack came from somewhere, the trumpet would sound and all men would rush to defend that area. Again (verse 20): our God will fight for us!

Another measure was taken. No one was to camp outside the city at night, and work duty and guard duty were evenly divided. Indeed, we read at the end of this chapter how also Nehemiah, his brothers, his men and guards, worked tirelessly day and night. They had no time to take off their clothes and never laid down their weapons. Even when they went to wash they kept their weapons close at hand. Everyone shares in the load equally.

You all know the words: sword and trowel. A sword to fight in one hand and a trowel to build in the other hand. That's the situation in which Israel found itself. Always ready to defend, but never ceasing to build. And this in faith: looking to the Lord. The church can sometimes not do without both instruments, the sword and the trowel. One of the best-known preachers in modern history, C. Spurgeon, published a magazine called *Sword and Trowel*. He meant by this title that the faith must be defended (the sword) and proclaimed (the trowel). We must always defend the truth, speaking boldly to the edification of all, in the faith that the Lord will strengthen and bless us.

We live in a completely different situation in Canada, don't we? We have many privileges as churches and church members. No one physically threatens us. But the enemy is still there. Even more dangerous perhaps, invisible, subtle, ever undermining our faith. We badly need the defence of prayer. We also need to take proper defensive measures, be on our guard against the spiritual powers of evil. Paul later wrote of this to Timothy: endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. And he added: Remember Jesus Christ! Almost the same words as Nehemiah spoke to Israel, but now with New Testament depth.

Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead. We do not need spears and swords today, but we do need the full armour of God. We read about this in Ephesians 6. Building the church we must stand on guard, trusting in the Lord and using the spiritual weapons He has given us.

We may have powerful enemies on earth, but remember that we have a wonderful Lord in heaven. Christ has, as Paul reminds the Colossians, disarmed all the powers and authorities. He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. They derided Him, they opposed Him, even crucified and killed him, but they could not overcome Him. Remember Jesus Christ: with such a Saviour, how could we cease working? In the weakness of God's people the power of the cross becomes evident.

Keep working and building wherever God has placed you, for Christ has triumphed and He assures us that His city will be completed, also through our efforts. Let us, young and old, be wholly glad and willing when Jesus calls us to His great battle, a battle wherein we are assured of victory.

AMEN.