

Defending the Gates - Nehemiah 1-4

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Preacher: Guest Preacher

[0 : 00] Good morning. I remember when I was a young Christian, and I saw a pastor walk up here with a notebook! and I thought, oh no, we're going to be here till 2 o'clock.

Yep. Yep. It's a joy to be here today with you folks. I appreciate the honor. My wife, Sharon, is sitting back here.

Wave at them, Sharon, so they'll know. Well, she's my girlfriend, too. Okay. About 25 years ago, we were ministering at what was then Grandview Heights Baptist.

Church here in Dubuque. And some of those folks from back there are visiting this morning. Would you please stand up? I know there's a number of you here.

Just stand up so people know that. Look at this. Thank you all for coming. I appreciate it.

[1 : 15] If this doesn't work, you can fire Pete and never have me come back. I never quite know what I'm going to say when I get up here.

My wife and I live in a senior apartment in Platteville, Wisconsin. There's independent living, which we are a part of.

And then there's assisted living. And then there's memory care. And people tend to work their way through the building. And they never mention the last one, which was Melby's funeral home right over here.

Sometimes you skip right from independent living to the funeral home. Well, the other night, we have a new manager in our department.

And she wanted to get to know the people. And so she and her family had a pizza party for us in the evening. And there were probably 35 of us or so gathered there.

[2 : 34] And after introducing herself and her husband and her children, she said, Now, I want every one of you to say something about yourself so that we know more about you.

Nobody said a word. They just sat there. And so I thought I'd get the ball rolling. And I raised my hand. And she said, Gus. I said, Well, I had a guy pull a gun on me once.

And we have a 95-year-old lady there who's sharp as a tack. And the minute I got that out of my mouth, she looked at me and said, Bad sermon? Well, it wasn't, I hope.

But anyway. If you have your Bibles with you, I would like to ask you to turn in the Old Testament to Nehemiah, the book of Nehemiah, and to the fourth chapter.

God has laid these thoughts on my heart. And I was working my way through these in the last couple of weeks and got the invitation to hear.

[3 : 53] So maybe God wants these words particularly shared with you today. Just a brief word of prayer before we look into this.

Father, we need you. We need you to open our ears, to open our hearts. We need you for direction, for clarity, for empowerment.

Please minister to us today. In our Savior's name, amen. Amen. The book of Nehemiah was almost certainly written by Ezra the scribe.

After the Babylonian captivity and after the Persian Empire came to power, they allowed many of those Israelite captives to return back to their homeland.

And there were three such journeys back. First, under Zerubbabel, about 480 B.C., and then Ezra a little later.

[5 : 12] And then along came Nehemiah. Zerubbabel rebuilt the temple. Ezra was just involved in getting the people there.

Nehemiah led the people in rebuilding the walls and the gates of the city. And it's that I want to talk to you about.

Except for the wealthy nobility, all of those returnees eagerly gave themselves to the work of rebuilding those walls and those gates that had been torn down by the Assyrians and the Babylonians and the rest.

And there was just nothing there but rubble. And they decided to rebuild. They didn't face much opposition rebuilding the walls.

When certain people living there saw that the gates were going up, they immediately took offense. Because there were people outside those walls that had been coming in and taking advantage of the people that lived there.

[6 : 26] And now they were not going to be able to get in there anymore. They were going to be locked out. And so there were a lot of troubles. Nehemiah chapter 3 talks about the walls and the ten gates that were put back in place.

And by the way, you pastors, if you're ever interested in doing a sermon series, do a series on the ten gates of the walls of Jerusalem. Because they're a perfect picture of the Christian life and the different things that are needed in the Christian life.

I never see that addressed as a type in the New Testament. But it certainly does fit the picture of that. But anyway, as we go into Nehemiah chapter 4, the walls have been built.

The gates are being put in place. Various things have been inspected. Repair, replace them. And now comes a long, hard, arduous journey of protecting the walls and the gates.

Outside were some enemies, led by Sanballat the Horonite and this Ammonite by the name of Tobiah.

[7 : 49] And they were their followers. Nehemiah did everything they could to keep those gates from being put in place. They had kept them out for many years.

Now they saw that their power base was being eroded and that the returned Jews were being protected by the repaired walls and gates. And they were furious.

And Nehemiah and his people now had to keep the enemy at bay so that they could not divide and destroy the work of God.

When a Bible-believing church body is fulfilling its God's given ministry, it will receive God's blessings.

His hand will be upon that church. They'll be protected. They will be protected. They will be directed. They will be empowered to reach the lost in their community.

[9 : 05] But when those things take place, an Emanemiah rises. You ever heard of Satan?

Satan? And he's going to have an impact if he can. He'll do everything he can. When I visit a church, and God allows me, I've had the privilege of visiting many of them down through the years. When I visit a church, I want to know, is the doctrine biblical? Is the leadership put in place correctly?

And do they have the right time of leaders? Are they preparing others for the place of leadership down the road? But you know the most important thing I want to see?

Is it a happy church? A happy church means it's a unified church. And a unified church is a church that's at peace.

[10 : 13] And believe me, folks, there aren't many churches like that around. And when you're in love with one another, and you're at peace with one another, and you're in love with the Lord Jesus Christ, you are going to be like a magnet to people that are looking for a church home.

Please, please, maintain that kind of life, if you will. And he's looking, a church is made up of people.

It's you, you, you, and you. So that means, if there's going to be a happy church, you're going to be happy. If there's unity with others, you're going to be, unity with everybody else in the body.

There will be peace between you. And Satan will do everything he can to tear down those walls and to get rid of those gates.

He will try to bring division to this place. Born-again Christians are foot soldiers in the ages-long warfare between God and Satan.

[11 : 23] And when you signed up, whether you knew it or not, you became part of an army, the army of God. And the Bible says, we don't struggle against flesh and blood.

We struggle against the powers of darkness and high places. But as God uses people to accomplish his purposes, Satan uses people to accomplish his.

need to understand that. Get that fixed in their mind. We know. We know how it all comes out.

We know how it's going to end. I had a fellow. He was a custodian in a junior high school. And he always wore T-shirts to work that had something about Jesus Christ or Christianity on them. He was just a testimony with his shirts.

[12 : 23] And he was walking away from me one day in church and I saw the back of his shirt. And it said, I read the last chapter. We win.

But in the meantime, in the meantime, there's a battle to be fought. And people get hurt. And divisions arise over the stupidest things. When I was a young pastor, we had a church at peace until suddenly we had two pianos and they argued over which one was going down in the Sunday school and which one was staying in the auditorium.

And I thought we were going to have a division. Christians. Do you realize how stupid that sort of thing is? The color of the carpet. We're going to have seats or pews.

Whee! How's that fit into the importance of eternity? Well, anyway, how do we keep from becoming a victim in this spiritual warfare that will and is being directed at you right now because you're doing something significant spiritually?

[13 : 50] Satan knows that. And as there are God's angels surrounding us today, there's also satanic demons out there watching to where they can find a place to slip in.

How do we go about gaining victory? How do we become winners and not losers? And I think Nehemiah 4 spells some of that out. So if you've turned there, the first thing that comes to my mind as I'm looking at this, particularly in the first 12 verses of Nehemiah 4, we must understand that we will face continued, determined attack by the enemy.

That's just a fact. There's never a question of if Satan is going to attack you. It's only a matter of how, when, where, and through whom.

Understand? That's going to happen. The scripture says in 1 Peter 5, 8, be of sober spirit, be on the alert.

Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.

[15 : 22] And that someone he's going to look at is you and me. And he'll use people to do it. I like David in the Psalms because he's so real.

He says, deliver me from my enemies. Oh my God. Do you ever pray that way? Deliver me from my enemies.

Deliver me from Satan. Deliver me from his emissaries. Deliver me from people that are willing and desirous to be used by him.

Well, how does he attack us? Look at verses 1 through 3. Now, when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry.

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?

[16 : 34] Will they restore it for themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish it in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of the rubbish and burn the ones of that?

Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him and says, what they're building, if a fox goes up on it, he will break down their stone wall. You know what that is?

That's ridicule. Satan uses ridicule. You're stupid. You think Jesus is coming again? You think he's in charge of this?

You think everything's going to be okay? Look around you. Do you see what kind of a mess we have? Are these tariffs going to work or aren't they? What's happening here? And by the way, Trump is not our savior.

Jesus is. And he may do some good things for us and praise God for it, that it may fall apart. I don't know. But he isn't our savior.

[17 : 36] Okay? A lot of people seem to think it is. You know, it scares me a little bit when he talks about bringing in a golden age.

Jesus Christ is going to bring in a golden age when he establishes the millennium. Trump can't do it. And I'm not sure that God is happy with that terminology.

It's a little scary to me. I don't know what he's going to allow or what's going to happen. But anyway, ridicule. Early in my ministry, we had a seminarian by the name of Phil that attended the church.

And he was rather an outspoken Christian, a little bit different than some people, but he was a good testimony for Christ. He worked on the assembly line in a factory, and they ridiculed him endlessly.

Bible banger. Holy Joe. Oh, he was ridiculed. As a matter of fact, one day they got so upset with him, a bunch of them grabbed him, threw him in the crate that was on the assembly line, and stabled it shut so that he was taken down the assembly line.

[18 : 53] He never was quite the same after that. Ridicule. That's one of Satan's ploys. Jesus was mocked. The soldiers taunted him before they beat him.

The elite Sadducees and the Pharisees mocked him. People mocked him. The crowd turned on him after they had greeted him with hosannas.

It was crucify him. But the Bible says in John 13, 16, truly, truly, I say unto you, a slave is not greater than his master.

And basically, he's saying, if they treated me like this, they're going to treat you like that. To ridicule. That's number one. Secondly, in verses 7 and 8, especially if you go to verse 7, when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Astroditers heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and that the breaches were getting to be closed, they were very angry and they plotted together.

Now, not just ridicule, but conspiracy. They plotted together. My guess is that Tobiah and the Ammonite probably didn't get along very well.

[20 : 33] You know who else didn't get along very well? The Sadducees and the Pharisees. The Sadducees were the religious liberals of the day.

The Pharisees were the religious conservatives of the day. And they were enemies of each other, didn't like each other, would have nothing to do with each other, until they decided to come together and get rid of this Jesus Christ.

The enemies of God will unite to fight the people of God because you represent God and they hate him. Conspiracy.

And so this conspiracy was going on. And though they're normally enemies of each other, they weren't anymore. Now, the third thing, besides ridicule and besides conspiracy, look at verse 11. Our enemies said they'll not know or see us till we come among them and kill them. So there was determined, open opposition.

[21 : 54] What those who were building the walls and putting the gates in place heard was this, lay off or else. Lay off or you're in trouble.

And open attempts to put fear into the hearts of Nehemiah and his followers to force God's work to a halt. We don't see much open opposition to Christianity in America.

Ridicule, yeah, and maybe a little worse than that, but we don't see what they see around the rest of the world.

The open doors watch list states that in 2024, there were 310 million Christians who faced high levels of persecution around the world.

310 million. about 8,000 churches were attacked and destroyed.

[23 : 13] About 4,700 Christians have been imprisoned last year. 4,500 of them murdered.

We haven't experienced that in America. Yet, hang on to your hat. This is Satan's ploy.

If nothing else works, attack. And if you don't find any satanic opposition in your life, then you better take a look at your life.

That means Satan isn't concerned about you. He's got more important fish to fry. Okay. Amy Carmichael, a tremendous missionary back in the 18th century, wrote a poem, and it went like this. Hast thou no scar, no hidden scar on foot or side or hand? I hear thee sung as mighty in the land.

[24 : 26] I hear them hail thy bright ascendant star. Hast thou no scar? Hast thou no wound? Yet I was wounded by the archers spent, leading me against a tree to die and rent by ravening wolves that encompassed me.

I swooned. Hast thou no wound? no wound? No scar? Yet as the master shall the servant be, and pierced are the feet that follow me.

But thine are all whole. Can you have followed far if you have no wound nor scar?

you will have. You will be attacked. Okay? The other thought that comes to me here is how do we react?

How do we react to ridicule, to conspiracies, to personal attack? How do we handle that? not. In Bible times, to capture a walled city was a long-term project.

[25 : 51] A siege of a city with walls and gates could last for years. And only when food and water begin to fail could the siege actually work.

Many of you have heard of Masada. And I could talk about that at length, but that would send us way over time this morning, so I'm not going to do that. Look it up sometime, M-A-S-A-D-A. Romans had an incredible siege against that high mesa there down near the Dead Sea. But anyway, what is the reaction that many Christians have when they realize they're facing satanic attack?

Look at verse 10. In Judah, it was said, the strength of those who bear the burdens is failing. In other words, they got discouraged.

Their strength was failing. They were getting overwhelmed by the size of the task that was before them, by the puniness of their strength, by the seemingly overpowering numbers of the enemy, the impossibility of accomplishing this.

[27 : 13] And like David, they would say, my God, my God, why have you forsaken us?

Discouragement. Look at verse 12. At that time, the Jews who lived near them, that is, the Jews now that lived outside of the city walls and had already capitulated to Tobiah and to the Ammonites, the Jews who lived near them came from all directions and said to us ten times, you must return to us.

Really, what they're saying is, give up. They're going to get you. There's too many of them. There's nothing you can do.

you can do. My wife and I had a cat named Toby. Would you believe that Toby lived 24 years?

No purebred. We went to the pet shop, paid \$7 and got this short-haired cat. 24 years he lived with us.

And I can't tell you how many times I saw him out on the deck, back of the house, just sitting there like this.

[28 : 43] And I walk over and look a little more closely and there'd be a mouse there between his feet. A live mouse. And that mouse didn't move a muscle.

If it did, he just reached out, swept, and brought him back. Just sat there and looked at it. That mouse knew it was dead.

It was paralyzed with fear. And I find Christians like this. They're paralyzed with fear of what's going to happen out there.

Listen, is your God on the throne or isn't he? Isn't it going to be all right? It isn't it? But sometimes we get fearful. And then notice, this intrigued me back in Nehemiah chapter 3 and verse 5.

If you look back there, it talks about who is repairing, but it says, their nobles would not stoop to serve the Lord.

[29 : 52] These nobles, the elite, the up and outers among the Jews, they thought it was beneath them to pick up a block, a stone, and a trowel and do any work.

Apathy. That's one of the things that happens if you're fearful. Apathy, uncaring. Well, let me hustle on to my last thought here.

That being true, that you're going to face satanic opposition, that you tend, because of it, to emotionally respond wrongly, how does one handle this kind of opposition as a church body, and how do you handle it as an individual?

And I think Nehemiah gives us some good thoughts here. I got four principles I want to end on here, and try to get you out of here, okay?

If you look at chapter 2, if you go way back to chapter 2 in verse 18, and I have a hard time turning pages in my Bible.

[31 : 13] I just bought a new Bible. At my age, that's optimistic. But you know how those Bibles are, and the pages stick together, and you've got to pull them all apart.

Well, I'm dealing with that with my Bible right now. But in chapter 2 in verse 18, Nehemiah told them of the hand of God upon him for good, and all the words that God had spoken to him, and they said, the people said, let's go do it.

Let's go do it. Let's build. Let's do this thing. Here is a willingness, even an eagerness, to get at the spiritual work that's in front of you.

Get thee behind me, Satan. I've got important things to do that God has called me to in this place. And by the way, get this fixed in your head.

God, there is not one unimportant person sitting in this auditorium today. You have a place and a ministry that God has given to you if you'll find it and do it.

[32 : 28] Let's arise and build. If you look at the last verse of chapter 2, and I replied to them, the God of heaven will make us prosperous and his servants will arise and build.

In my first church, we took this as our marching order, the God of heaven will prosper us, therefore we, his servants, will arise and build.

And God blessed because people put their hands to the work and wouldn't let Satan destroy them. you're looking at a farm kid.

You're looking at a guy that when I found out I had to take speech class in college, was in an eyelash and not going to college. To stand before people petrified me.

When I came to Christ and went through college, I knew I didn't know much spiritually. I knew I needed some training. My work schedule wouldn't let me get to church like I wanted to.

[33 : 41] And when I graduated from college, I decided to go to seminary, never having any intention of going into the ministry. I wanted to learn.

I thought I can learn some things here and be the right-hand man to a pastor when I get out of school to get going. Isn't funny how God works?

I was there about a semester and it began to just eat away at me. Gus, you need to go into ministry.

No, I don't want to do that.

I can't stand in front of people. I can't lead people. I don't know what I'm doing and I'm not sure I even know yet today. But here we are a few decades later.

But anyway, I still remember Galatians 6.14. I don't know why God used that verse, but he did.

[34 : 42] God forbid that I should glory except in the cross of my Lord Jesus Christ by which the world has been crucified unto me and I have been crucified into the world.

And the Lord just nailed that in my heart and away we went. I don't know what God has for you. It may be far beyond anything that you think you possibly can do.

I think we short change God because we don't think we can do it. We're not capable. We're not smart enough. We're not young enough. We're not good looking enough. We do blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.

I don't read a lot of poetry but this one by Edgar Guest I love. Somebody said it couldn't be done but with a chuckle he replied maybe it couldn't but he wouldn't be one who said so until he tried.

So he buckled right in with a trace of a grin. If he were he hit it. He started to sing as he tackled a thing that couldn't be done. And he did it.

[35 : 58] Somebody scoffed oh you'll never do that. At least they've never done it. But he took off his coat and he took off his hat and the first thing you know he'd begun it.

With a lift to his chin and a bit of a grin without any doubting or quit it he started to sing as he tackled a thing that couldn't be done and did it. There are thousands to tell you it cannot be done. Thousands to prophesy failure. Thousands to point out to you one by one the dangers that wait to his savior. But just buckle in with a bit of a grin.

Take off your coat and go to it. Start to sing as you tackle the thing that can't be done and you'll do it. Yeah.

If God's on your side and if he is leading. So there's this willingness to spiritual work that's necessary to defeat Satan.

[37 : 01] Ready to do what God calls you to do. Secondly, a readiness to fight if need be. For sake of time, I'm not going to read the verses there in chapter four.

But you need to remember as Nehemiah laid out his forces. There were people who were not working but had the weapons at hand.

And there were those who were working but had trowel and shovel and everything else. And when they ran into trouble, these people were going to come with their weapons. And besides that, those who were building had their works, items in one hand and their weapons in the other.

And when they worked, they had both because they were ready to fight. You're in a battle, folks. You're in a battle. And you're on the winning side. So go to it.

The third thing is this. This is in verse 19 through 20. I do want to look at this in chapter four, verses 19 through 20.

[38 : 14] And I said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, the work is great and widely spread, and we are separated on the wall from one another.

In the place where you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there, and God will fight for us. You know what he's talking about here?

Unity. Unity. Unity. I have been in so many churches where there is division in the body. God cannot work in that kind of a church until that is resolved and the people of that church are brought together.

And again, folks, this is an individual matter. The gospels tell us that if you're going to worship or to sacrifice and you're coming to worship and you know that there's someone there that has something against you, you are obligated to go to them and try to make it right before you worship. In other words, it's a lie. We lived in Arkansas for 12 years, and I worked with another pastor down there, sort of as a co-pastor when he wasn't around.

[39 : 41] I preached and did the things. But anyway, we had started a Hispanic ministry in the church along with our regular Anglo congregation.

That Hispanic ministry just began to mushroom. They're soul winners, and they began to lead people to Jesus Christ, and that group grew and grew.

We met on Sunday mornings, they met on Sunday afternoons, and one day my wife and I decided we'd stop in at one of their services just to encourage them and let them know that we cared.

And we went in, and we sat down, and a guy stood up here like me and harangued for about 20 or 25 minutes, and our senior pastor from the Anglo church was sitting behind me, and he leaned over and said, that's just the introduction, they haven't started preaching yet.

You've got to have music first. Well, there came a time, and everything was done in Spanish, so I had no clue.

[40 : 52] I just kind of followed what everybody else was doing. And suddenly everybody stood to their feet, and like you this morning, people started going to everybody else and shaking hands and hugging.

So Sharon thought we joined right in. We didn't know anybody, but we went over and shook hands and hugged people, and we were at this for quite a while. Finally, we came back and sat down.

The Anglo pastor leaned up to me and said, that was not meet and greet. And I said, what did we just do?

I was afraid we really put our foot in it. He said, no. They're preparing to observe the Lord's table. And before they do that, if they know or think somebody has something against them, they go to them to make it right before they observe the Lord's table.

[42 : 06] He said, did you notice there were two or three men on their knees here that didn't go? I said, yeah, I wondered about that. He said, they're making things right with God, and then they're going to go see the brother or sister that's got an issue.

And I thought to myself, wouldn't it be glorious if every one of our churches practiced that? Would that make some changes in our churches? Unity, folks.

Oneness. None of this division. The last thing is this. Again, verses 4 and 5.

Hear, O our God, we're despised. Turn back their taunt on their own heads. 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.

And then they go on to verse 9. And we prayed to our God and set a protection against them day and night.

[43 : 17] And then on to verse 20. In the place where you hear the sound of the trumpet rally to us there, our God will fight for us.

When all is said and done, it's God that gives the victory. But he does ask us to roll up our sleeves and to serve him the best we know how.

I don't know what you're facing in your spiritual walk as a church. I don't know what you're facing as individuals.

Do you believe God can handle it? Is it something tomorrow, next week, months ahead, years ahead, do you believe God will? How big is your God? Do you trust him? Commit it to him.

Once the walls were rebuilt and once the gates were put in place, they have to be defended, both in our individual lives and in our churches.

[44 : 24] And again, when God begins to do something significant, so does Satan. Ridicule, secret, conspiracy, open opposition.

Be aware of that. And be aware that it may impact you emotionally. but led by God.

Nehemiah led his people to do the work that God had called him to, to be prepared to find Satan and his enemies, to remain in love with all the brothers and sisters that were there, that there might

be unity, and to place confidence in God to do and be all that we needed.

And I pray, brother, pastor, being new here, I pray that God will enable you and everyone here to defend the walls and the gates as God has called you to.

Would you join me in prayer, please? Father, Father, I've just bared my soul this morning.

[45 : 53] I trust that these words will bear fruit. in the lives of every person in this church, and us in the church itself.

Thank you. In Jesus' name, amen.