

Sticks and Stones May Break My Bones . . .

Nehemiah . . . Memoirs of an Ordinary Man – Part VIII

Nehemiah 4:1-6

Introduction

In 1845, John Franklin left England to discover a northwest passageway – a seaway for ships through the Canadian Arctic that connected the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. According to Kent Hughes' commentary on James, he took, with him on this expedition, one hundred thirty-eight specially chosen men from the Royal Navy. No one knew what lay ahead. In fact, they did not even seem to be aware of the severe weather conditions that they would encounter in and around the North Pole. Nevertheless, they sailed off in two state-of-the-art ships. Each ship was equipped with an auxiliary steam engine and a huge storeroom that could hold a twelve day supply of coal, should steam power ever be needed during the voyage.

They were confident in their quest, as the ships sailed amidst imperial pomp and glory, but they were unprepared. They had not planned thoroughly enough for what lay ahead in the ice-filled waters off of northern Alaska. In fact, the only clothing they took were their uniforms and overcoats provided by Her Majesty's Navy.

Two months after their departure, a British whaler made contact with the two ships off the coast of Canada. He was the last European to see them alive.

Search parties would spend twelve years retracing the path of the Franklin expedition to, eventually, piece together some of the puzzle. The expedition had, evidently, been stalled by icy water. Eskimos reported seeing men pushing a wooden boat across the ice. Then, members of the search party

saw a haunting sight at Simpson Straight. They saw the three wooden masts of one of the ships protruding through the ice.

Amid all their findings, the most devastating was the discovery that neither ship had stocked their coal supply. In fact, they had both turned that huge storeroom into a lounge filled with a 1,200-volume library, an organ, and even cupboard space for elegant place settings of china and silver for all the officers. One historian said that the Franklin expedition was prepared for weather conditions inside the Royal Navy officer's club, not the Arctic Ocean. One search party found thirty frozen bodies in a tent near the water's edge. The officers were dressed in their overcoats, with their silk scarves still in place.

They were confident and their hopes were high, but they were not prepared for the challenges of that expedition.

Jesus Christ said, according to John, chapter 15, verse 18,

If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you.

Are you prepared for that?

He also warned His disciples, as John, chapter 16, verse 2, tells us,

They will make you outcasts . . . an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God.

Are you ready for that?

Jesus said, as it says in Luke, chapter 12, verses 51 through 53,

Do you suppose I came to grant peace on earth? I tell you, no, but rather division; for from now on . . . members in one household will be divided . . . father against son, and son against father; mother against daughter, and daughter against mother . . .

Are you ready for that?

Matthew, chapter 13, verse 21, tells us that,

. . . persecution arises because of [the presence of] the word . . .

Our Lord, throughout His life on earth, was mocked by the religious leaders. The chief priests mocked Him. Herod mocked Him. And, eventually, the soldiers mocked Him.

The early church was ridiculed at Pentecost, and the city mocked the Apostles, according to the book of Acts, chapter 2, verse 13, by saying,

. . . They are full of sweet wine.

In other words, "These men are drunk."

Hebrews, chapter 11, records that many believers endured cruel mocking. Are you ready for that?

Galatians, chapter 6, verse 12, informs us that believers will,

. . . be persecuted for the cross of Christ.

Paul wrote to Timothy, and to us as well, in II Timothy, chapter 3, verse 12, that,

. . . all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

In I Corinthians, chapter 4, verses 11 through 13, Paul also wrote,

. . . we are . . . roughly treated . . . we are reviled . . . we are persecuted . . . we are slandered . . . we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now.

Are you ready for that?

For one hundred years, the Jews had become acclimated to broken down walls. They had become comfortable living with the reproach on the name of their holy city and their true and living God.

But now, a man has arrived with tools for building, with supplies necessary for an expedition of faith. He has counted the cost and he knows exactly what to expect. He has brought along plenty of coal, if you please.

Now, you need to understand that, during the time of the Old Testament, the city of Jerusalem was the center of God's earthly purpose. To restore the

city would be a terrible blow to the enemies of God's purpose and God's people.

So, in less than a week after Nehemiah sailed into town, the cold winds of adversity began to blow. The enemy, the reviler, the slanderer, the hater of God and the hater of God's people has also arrived. A battle is brewing. A blizzard of conflict is about to begin.

Behind all opposition to the work of God is the chief opponent of God. Anytime heaven advances, hell opposes. And, anytime you so live to see God glorified and His church enhanced, supported, supplied, or defended, you will feel the wind of adversity in some form or another.

Whether Nehemiah knew it or not, the Adversary had moved his base of operations just outside the city of Jerusalem.

A Closer Look At The Enemy

Before we watch his strategies against Nehemiah, let us take a closer look at the Enemy himself.

Who is he?

He has a number of disguises and a number of names:

- The first name is Satan, as in Job, chapter 1. This name refers to his role as the adversary of God and God's people.
- He is called, of course, the devil, as in Matthew, chapter 4, verse 1. This word means "accuser". He constantly accuses God before people, and he accuses people before God.
- Another name, that our Lord used for His arch enemy, as in Matthew, chapter 12, verse 27, was Beelzebul. This simply means "Lord of the Flies," or "Master of the Flies." It refers to his masterminding of everything that is corrupt.

Other names that appear in the scriptures for this Master of Corruption are:

- The ruler of this world, as in John, chapter 12, verse 31.
- Lucifer, which was his original name, and refers to his aura of light, as in Isaiah, chapter 14, verse 12.
- Father of lies, that is, the source, the originator of lying, as in John, chapter 8, verse 44. Lying is his native tongue. When

he tells a lie, he is speaking in his own language.

- The tempter, as in I Thessalonians, chapter 3, verse 5.
- The god of this world, as in II Corinthians, chapter 4, verse 4.
- The enemy, as in Matthew, chapter 13, verse 39.
- The power of darkness, as in Luke, chapter 22, verse 53.
- The prince of the power of the air, as in Ephesians, chapter 2, verse 2.
- A murderer, as Jesus called him in John, chapter 8, verse 44.
- The evil one, as the Apostle John referred to him in I John, chapter 2, verse 13.
- The old serpent, as he is called in Revelation, chapter 12, verse 9. It is interesting that in the first book of the Bible, he is introduced as the serpent, and in the last book of the Bible, he is referred to as the old serpent.
- The adversary, as Peter called him in I Peter, chapter 5, verse 8.
- The angel of light, also. Listen to the warning Paul gave the church in Corinth, and, I might add, our church today, in II Corinthians, chapter 11, verses 13 through 15,

For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their deeds.

In other words, Satan and his teachers wrap themselves with the vocabulary of righteousness, but, all the while, they are attempting to deceive, manipulate, and lead their followers into unrighteousness.

- The final name of Satan is interesting. It is found in Revelation, chapter 12, verse 3, and calls Satan, “the red dragon.” The context of the passage reveals his desire to shed blood, his penchant for war, his lust for killing, and his power to intimidate and deceive.

How does he operate?

How does the enemy of God and God’s people operate?

1. With destructive purpose.

He is the one who, according to I Peter, chapter 5, verse 8,

. . . prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour [destroy].

He is dedicated to destroying the worship of the one true, living God, whose throne he coveted and for which he fought. He failed and was cast to earth, and has, ever since, attempted to rob God’s throne of worship and glory. Any Christian or church that is dedicated to bringing God worship and glory is an enemy of The Enemy.

When you align your purpose in life to bring glory and honor to God, then that one who opposes the glory of God will oppose you.

Satan operates with destructive purpose.

2. He also operates with remarkable proficiency.

He is intelligent, discerning, and cunning. His kingdom is connected through communication systems that would boggle our minds.

But do not forget -

Now, in the course of taking a closer look at the Enemy, I do not want you to forget several things:

- His power is limited. He is not omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent.
- His influence is delegated. He cannot do anything apart from our sovereign God’s approval. And what he intends for evil, God turns around for good. The serpent is a puppet on a string held by the hand of God.
- His destruction is already determined. He knows what the end of this Book says. He knows, but his hatred and anger move him against the throne of God while he still has time.
- His success is constantly hindered. Not only can he not lift one finger against God, he is also limited in what he can accomplish against a believer.

The believer who dares, by faith, to mount an expedition into enemy territory for the advancement of the gospel, has been given the proper clothing.

The disciple of Christ has been given the armor of the believer, and Ephesians, chapter 6, describes, for us, every piece necessary to protect us against the Red Dragon's fire.

3. The dragon not only operates with destructive purpose and remarkable proficiency, but he also operates with enormous patience.

He is as patient as any fisherman who drops a lure into the pond and waits. So this dragon, and his kingdom, drops lures into the ponds of our lives and waits – for weeks . . . for years . . . he is willing to wait a lifetime.

His lures are called several things in the New Testament.

Methods

- One word is the word, “method”. Paul wrote in Ephesians, chapter 6, verse 11,

Put on the full armor of God, that you may be able to stand firm against the [“methodias”] of the devil.

The “methodias,” which gives us our transliterated word “method,” implies the craftiness of the devil.

- The second word is the word, “schemes”. This is found in II Corinthians, chapter 2, verse 11.

. . . that no advantage be taken of us by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his schemes.

Schemes, in this verse, or in the Greek, “Noema,” is a word that could be translated “designs.” It actually refers to intellectual capacity. In other words, Satan brilliantly designs ingenious tricks and snares to entrap the church and the believer. And, he lays those traps with great care and patience.

My wife recently came into my study and said, “Honey, you’ve got to read this.”

It was a book she was reading, by author Patsy Clairmont, entitled *Under His Wings*. While she left the book with me to read one page, I soon found myself reading several chapters. Clairmont described Satan as a fisherman with very descriptive words.

Fishing is a good way to understand Satan's agenda for us. I come from a long line of fishermen, the kind who won't let you

move around in the boat lest you disturb the fish. Some of my family have been known to sit in a rickety rowboat 24 hours at a time. They sit and watch for activity in and on the water. When the action is right, they cast out, hoping to snag a whopper. When the fish takes the bait, he's reeled in and soon becomes dinner.

In much the same way, Satan slips his rowboat into the waters of our lives. Then he waits for our moments of weakness, watches for unmet needs, and lurks in the murky, unsettled issues of our lives. He carefully checks his tackle box and selects just the right bait. When he thinks the time is ideal, he casts his line and waits for as long as necessary for us to take the bait. Then he reels us in. Unlike the fishermen I've known, Satan never throws any back. In fact, he seems to favor the little ones.

The Red Dragon has had two thousand years to hone his skills and fine tune his lures used against the church. He cannot have our souls, but he can take away our song. He can destroy our character, our witness, our effectiveness. That is, if we take the bait . . . if we swallow his lure.

A Clever Lure Examined

Nowhere can you find a list of Satan's schemes and methods in such an obvious display as in Nehemiah chapters 4, 5, and 6. That is why I have entitled this series, “The Lure Of the Red Dragon.” The Adversary, the Tempter, the Deceiver, the Angel of Light, the Dragon, is never mentioned by name in these chapters. If you look closely enough, however, you will see the shadow of his scales, you will smell the fire from his nostrils, and you will almost hear the slip of his oars in the water as he glides toward Jerusalem.

Lucifer will design four lures and drop them, one at a time, into the pond of Nehemiah's life.

The first lure has been one of his most successful methods throughout generations of time. It is simply called the lure of ridicule or mocking. Look at Nehemiah, chapter 4, verse 1.

Now it came about that when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became furious and very angry and mocked the Jews.

Five Scornful Questions –

They laughed at the Jews. The ridicule of Nehemiah, and his fellow workers, by Sanballat, and his friends, will eventually take the form of five questions. Each question is designed to intimidate and embarrass the Jews for what they are attempting to do.

“What are these feeble Jews doing?”

Notice the first question, in verse 2,

And he [Sanballat] spoke in the presence of his brothers and the wealthy men of Samaria and said, “What are these feeble Jews doing?” . . .

1. This is a question of the Jews strength.

“What are these weak, literally “withered,” miserable Jews doing?”

In other words, “Who do you they think you are?!”

Goliath asked that same question when little David, armed only with a shepherd’s sling and five smooth stones, came running out to fight him. One stone for Goliath and four more, should he need them, for each of Goliath’s four sons.

The Israelite army held their breath, thinking to themselves, “Goliath is too big to kill.”

But, as one author said,

David ran toward Goliath, thinking to himself, “He’s too big to miss.”

When Goliath saw David coming toward him, he mocked him, as I Samuel, chapter 17, verse 42, tells us,

. . . he disdained him; for he was but a youth . . .

Alan Redpath wrote, as quoted by Donald K. Campbell in his book, *Nehemiah: Man in Charge*,

The world judges everything by size, by headlines, by imposing plans, by vast advertisements; and it pours contempt upon the feeble little flock of the people of God. “You, with your feeble prayer meetings. You, with your silly little plan of getting people converted one by one. How can you possibly stand alongside our great economic programs in which a whole world can be revolutionized in a few years? You have no intellect, you are out of date, you have no money, you have no status. You feeble little lot!”

Have you ever been laughed at for your faith? Have you ever faced ridicule for your relationship

with Christ? Do you collapse at the sound of laughter?

Who do these feeble Jews think they are?

“Are they going to restore it for themselves?”

The second question they ask sarcastically, in verse 2,

. . . Are they going to restore it for themselves? . . .

In other words, “Do they really understand what they’re attempting to do?”

“They don’t even have the foggiest idea what it takes to build a wall! Look over there – that guy’s a perfume maker. And look up there – that guy makes jewelry. And look over here – some single women are mixing mortar.”

2. This was a question of intelligence.

Have you ever felt foolish before the wisdom of the world? Have you ever wilted before the accusation of a sharp professor, a dignified relative, an educated friend?

Surely you are too smart to need a religious crutch?!

“Can they offer sacrifices?”

Question number three is also quoted in verse 2, . . . *Can they offer sacrifices? . . .*

Derek Kidner is probably right when he rewords this question for our understanding by saying,

Are these Jews going to pray their wall up? It’s their only hope!

3. This was a question of faith.

What a clever lure. “Hey, have you forgotten that the faith of your fathers wasn’t good enough to keep these walls up? And, that their faith hasn’t been able to rebuild these same walls over the last one hundred years? What do you think you’ve got – greater faith than them? Do you think your sacrifices will do the trick? Are we going see some kind of miracle?”

“Can they finish in a day?”

They sarcastically ask the fourth question, in verse 2,

. . . Can they finish in a day? . . .

4. This was a question of organization.

It was like saying, “You’re going to need to finish this project in one day, because you don’t have a game plan that’ll last very long. You won’t last out here in the cold very long – you’ll freeze to death. You haven’t prepared for a long winter.”

“Can they revive the stones from the dusty rubble?”

The final question of ridicule, in verse 2,

... Can they revive the stones from the dusty rubble even the burned ones?

5. This was a question of skill.

“They don’t have the skill to resurrect a wall out of the midst of a century of rubble. It’ll never work. They’ll never make it.”

Then this guy, named Tobiah, who was standing nearby, added his little barb, in verse 3,

... Even what they are building – if a fox should jump on it, he would break their stone wall down!

They laughed and laughed and laughed.

The people of God were laughed at because of their:

- Strength,
- Intelligence,
- Faith,
- Organization, and
- Skill.

Warren Wiersbe wrote, in his book entitled, *Be Determined*,

Some people, who can stand bravely when they are shot at, will collapse when they are laughed at.

The Red Dragon just watched and waited.

“You don’t have the skill to raise godly children. You don’t have the strength to live for Christ. You don’t have the intelligence to stand up to the wisdom of the world. You don’t have the faith to finish anything for God. Who do you feeble people think you are?”

Has the Red Dragon dropped the lure of ridicule into the waters of your life lately?

You can only imagine how powerful this lure of ridicule was to the people of Nehemiah. Surely it would bring the work to a halt. Surely someone would say, “Nehemiah, they’re right. We just might

as well admit it. We don’t know what we’re doing. We’re not wall builders. This is impossible!”

Three Ways Nehemiah Avoided the Dragon’s Lure

How did Nehemiah avoid the Dragon’s lure? There were three ways.

What he did not do –

1. What he did not do – retaliate!

“Is that right, Tobiah? A little fox could push this wall down. Well, come on over here, you little weasel, and try to push it down yourself.”

There was none of that from Nehemiah. Retaliating never builds walls.

What he did do –

2. What he did do – he prayed!

Would you notice his prayer, in verse 4,

Hear, O our God, how we are despised! . . .

Stop! Do not miss this. “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.”

That is not true is it? Nehemiah prayed it this way, “Lord, sticks and stones may break my bones, and their words have really hurt me.”

Hear, O our God . . .

In other words, “Have you been listening, Lord. Have you been hearing what they’ve been saying?”

Was Nehemiah caught by surprise? No. But, it hurt him none the less.

He is not finished praying, in verses 4 through 5,

Return their reproach on their own heads and give them up for plunder in a land of captivity. Do not forgive their iniquity and let not their sin be blotted out before Thee, for they have demoralized the builders.

You must understand this prayer as belonging to the dispensation of the Old Covenant. We do not pray this way in the New Covenant, or at least we should not pray that people will not find forgiveness. The Old Covenant was based upon the Law and the Law was based upon retaliation.

To hate Jerusalem was to hate God. An enemy of Jerusalem was an enemy of God. The Old Testament saint would pray that God would enact vengeance upon his enemies on behalf of God’s character and glory and holy city.

Nehemiah said nothing to his mockers – he said everything to his Master. And, he fully expected his Master to take care of his mockers, for vengeance belongs to God.

He did not retaliate. He did pray.

What he did next –

3. What he did next – he kept on working.

Look at verse 6,

So we built the wall and the whole wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work.

Sticks and stones will break your bones, and words will always hurt you. They will always hurt you, but they do not have to stop you.

Oh that you, like Nehemiah, will avoid the powerful lure of the Red Dragon, called ridicule, and keep building the walls of life and service for the glory and honor of God.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 4/9/2000 by Stephen Davey.

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