

God's Enemies

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- [0 : 0 0] Good morning. My name is Matthew Capone, and I'm the pastor here at Cheyenne Mountain Presbyterian Church, and it's my joy to bring God's word to you today.
- Special welcome if you are new or visiting with us. We are glad you're here, and we're glad you're here not because we are trying to fill seats, but we are glad you're here because we are following after Jesus together as one community.
- And as we follow after Jesus, we are convinced that there is no one so good that they don't need God's grace, and no one so bad that they can't have it. And that means that God has something to say to everyone in his word, and everyone needs to hear what God has to say.
- And so that's what we do at this portion of our worship service. We look at God's word so that we can hear from him. If you've been with us, you know we're in the book of Nehemiah. The book of Nehemiah is about a man named Nehemiah. It takes place in the Old Testament.
- So it's about God's people before Jesus' first coming. And in this portion of the Old Testament, we're in the 5th century B.C. It's around 446, 445.
- [1 : 0 7] God's people have been in exile, and now they've returned. But even though they're returning to the city of Jerusalem, the city that God had given them with the purpose of being a light to the nations, they've neglected God's city and God's ways.
- As we saw in chapter 1, the wall around Jerusalem had fallen down, and so Nehemiah, so discouraged in seeing the sin of God's people, repented with tears and fasting and prayer.
- And so he turned away from sin. Then we saw in chapter 2 that Nehemiah did not just turn away from sin, but he turned back to God and his mission. He returned to Jerusalem and began leadership in rebuilding the wall.
- And then last week in chapter 3, we saw the tremendous impact that happened when it was not just Nehemiah working, but also all of God's people coming together, each contributing whatever they could, putting aside their preferences and their differences to work together towards one mission.
- And so we saw that we can have different people with different missions or different people with one mission, and the impact that happened in chapter 3 when there was different people with one mission was tremendous.
- [2 : 1 4] Now, if I were to ask any one of you, or you were to go to any church that is seeking to be active and vibrant, you would hear people say that they want to have an impact. In fact, I would be surprised if there was someone who told me they were uninterested in having an impact.
- They did not want to have any impact. But there's a problem with impact. As one man has said, impact and opposition go together. Impact and opposition go together.
- You cannot change something without overcoming a force. Even if this is something destructive, right, you can't change a wall or a building without moving things, without taking things that would oppose you.

You cannot rebuild a wall like they're doing here without opposition as well. And so as we see the excitement from chapter 3, the excitement of God's people going out on God's mission, trying to have an impact and rebuild, we should expect nothing less than for them to experience opposition.

And that's what we're going to see here in chapter 4. And so the question that we have is, what happens when opposition comes? We know that it's going to happen if we have an impact.

[3 : 27] We know that we're going to face it if we want an impact. And so how do we prepare? What do we know and do when opposition comes? It's with that that we are in Nehemiah chapter 4.

You can turn there with me in your Bibles. It's also printed in the very end of your worship guide. As we come to this chapter, remember that this is God's word. And God tells us in Jeremiah that his word is a hammer that breaks a rock into pieces.

In other words, there is no opposition that can stand up against the impact of God's word. And so that's why we turn to it now, starting in Nehemiah chapter 4 in verse 1.

Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and 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?

Will they restore it for themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish up in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish and burned ones at that?

[4 : 30] Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, Yes. What are they building? If a fox goes up on it, he will break down their stone wall. Verse 4. Hear, O our God, for we are despised.

Turn back their taunt on their own heads and 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.

So we built the wall, and all the wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work. Verse 7. But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and that the breaches were beginning to be closed, they were very angry.

And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it. And we prayed to our God and set a guard as protection against them day and night. In Judah it was said, the strength of those who bear the burdens is failing.

There is too much rubble. By ourselves we will not be able to rebuild the wall. Verse 11. And our enemies said, they will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work.

[5 : 50] At that time the Jews who lived near them came from all directions and said to us ten times, you must return to us. So in all the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, in open places, I stationed the people by their clans with their swords, their spears, and their bows.

And I looked and arose and said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord who is great and awesome and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes.

Verse 15. When our enemies heard that it was known to us and that God had frustrated their plan, we all returned to the wall, each to his work. From that day on, half of my servants worked on construction and half held the spears, shields, bows, and coats of mail.

And the leaders stood behind the whole house of Judah who were building on the wall. Those who carried burdens were loaded in such a way that each labored on the work with one hand and held his weapon with the other.

Verse 18. And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side which he built while he built. The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me. 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 far from one another.

[7 : 14] In the place where you hear the sound of the trumpet rally to us there, our God will fight for us. Verse 21. So he labored at the work and half of them held the spears from the break of dawn until the stars came out.

I also said to the people at that time, Let every man and his servants pass the night within Jerusalem that they may be a guard for us by night and may labor by day. So neither I nor my brothers nor my servants nor the men of the guard who followed me, none of us took off our clothes.

Each kept his weapon at his right hand. Please pray with me as we come to this portion of God's word. Dear Father in heaven, we thank you that your word is a hammer that breaks a rock into pieces.

We thank you that it's powerful, brought things to life at the beginning of your creation. It brings us to life now. And so we ask that you would do that by your spirit this morning.

That you would send your spirit to help us as we hear from you. That you would speak to us things that we can understand and apply and know and love about you.

[8 : 26] Most of all, we ask that you would cast a spotlight on Jesus so that we could see him as more beautiful than anything else. We ask all these things in the name of your son.

Amen. If you remember from chapter 2, that was the first time that we met these opponents of Nehemiah and I mentioned that we were going to talk more about them later. Because in chapter 2, all they had to do was question Nehemiah.

They were confident that he was not going to succeed. And then if you remember at the very end of the chapter, they asked him if he was trying to rebel against the king. And he had his famous answer in which he did not actually tell them what they wanted to hear.

He did not talk about the king at all but instead said that God was going to fight for them. Now after chapter 3, with the tremendous building that happened with God's people, we see that as the impact that they're having increases, so does the opposition.

It was small opposition in chapter 2 because Nehemiah had small impact. And now that he's had big impact, large impact, it is big and large opposition. We start out here with essentially an ancient Near Eastern Twitter thread with the mocking from these leaders.

[9 : 36] First of all, in verse 1, they're enraged and jeering. we can imagine them posting quick, small character posts about the ridiculousness of these Israelites who are trying to rebuild the wall.

He calls them feeble in verse 2 and then he mocks them for their spirituality. He says, will they sacrifice? In other words, are they going to use a spiritual solution to a physical problem?

Don't they understand that this is a wall? These silly Jews. The resources that they have, the tools that they have, have nothing to do with the problem that's in front of them. In fact, if you look at chapter 3, they know that they're having priests build the wall.

So what are these priests doing? They're just sacrificing, trying to rebuild. And then the mocking gets even worse with Tobiah the Ammonite. We can imagine him posting an animated picture of a fox.

He says, if a fox goes up on it, he will break down their stone wall. And so what starts out with mocking, however, continues to become even worse than that.

[10 : 44] Because in verse 11, we find out that these enemies are not just making fun of God's people. They're not just mocking their methods. They're not just talking about how foolish they are.

They actually have a real plan. And our enemy said, verse 11, they will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work. We saw before that in verse 7 and 8 that there was a real plan.

They're plotting in verse 8 to come together and fight against Jerusalem and cause confusion in it. And if this sounds like an idle threat, this is one of the places where what the Bible tells us is also attested to in other ancient documents.

And so we know that these leaders were very powerful. This Arab leader is not just the leader of one group. He's actually the leader of multiple tribes. The Ammonites would have been a powerful Jewish family with great political influence.

And Sambalot, who we've met a couple times before, was the governor of Samaria. Geographically, they would have represented an area that would have surrounded all of Jerusalem. And so these are not just idle, mocking threats, but these are very powerful political figures who are coming up against God's people.

[12 : 01] It would be completely understandable for them to be afraid and confused and worried about what was going to happen. And so what we see first is that God has real enemies.

Deciding it as it is to talk about returning to God's ways and His mission, if we return to God's ways and His mission, we are going to get to meet His enemies. God has real enemies that hate His ways.

They want to destroy His people and His mission. That's why 1 Peter tells us to be sober-minded because the devil prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour.

Now in this chapter here, we see actual death threats. If you are a Christian in certain parts of the world, you'll face that. So this is not unknown from what Christians today are facing.

That's not what we face here in the United States. So the last time I checked, I don't think necessarily killing. We don't see people put in prison. But we do see an awful lot of lies and we see an awful lot of lawsuits.

[13 : 15] We see lies and lawsuits in the U.S. We see people on both ends of the political spectrum who are opposed to God and His ways, who are enemies of God.

We see people who oppress the poor. which is a group that God loves. We see groups that are fighting to devalue human life, which God says was made in His image.

We see groups that are seeking to divide people along racial lines when it was God who made the nations. Christians. We see groups that are looking to distort and destroy marriage, which God gave as one of His greatest gifts to humanity.

And then we just see people who are spreading lies about God and His people. Not speaking what is true, but instead making up stories about what's actually going on.

And so I said at the beginning as I say every Sunday that there is no one so good they don't need God's grace and no one so bad they can't have it. But the harsh reality is that while there is no one so bad they can't have God's grace.

[14 : 27] There are many people who are not open to it. Martin Luther had a friend of his, his barber asked him for advice about prayer. This man wasn't sure where to start and so he knew Martin Luther was a theologian and he said I really want some help.

I need some help praying to God. And so Martin Luther wrote something that's become very famous now called A Simple Way to Pray which was something he wrote. He prays that God would convert people who are open to His grace but he would also restrain and it might be divisive or destructive.

And so as we offer God's grace to everyone we're fighting against God and His ways. And so what happens when God's enemies show up?

First of all we see what's completely natural among God's people that there's great discouragement and fear. In verse 10 they decide that they're actually not going to be able to do this.

They say by ourselves we will not be able to rebuild the wall. And in a sense they're right. By themselves they're not going to be able to. But then they don't just face discouragement they face criticism from their own people.

[15 : 43] There are other Jews who are watching what's going on and they believe that this is too dangerous to continue. And so in verse 12 the Jews who lived near them came from all directions and said to us not just once how many times?

They said ten times you must return to us. And so when we face God's enemies when we meet God's enemies discouragement is real.

We'll be tempted to believe that we are not powerful enough to face what's been brought against us. We will believe and be tempted to believe that the best thing we can do is retreat and give up.

The devil has different strategies. C.S. Lewis is famous for talking about these in his Mere Christianity. One of his strategies is to do what we talked about last week to convince people that there is nothing more important than their comforts and their convenience.

That's one of our enemy's most effective strategies in North America. But when that strategy doesn't work the other strategy is to resort to all out war. And so when God's people had overcome the temptation to go after their own ways and comforts and preferences in chapter 3 the enemy is left with only one option and that's this to come at them with tremendous opposition.

[17 : 10] In the mini-series Band of Brothers which follows a company of paratroopers involved in D-Day there's a scene near the end where Lieutenant Dick Winters is with his people it's the Battle of the Bulge and as they show up they meet all these soldiers who are coming back from the front lines.

They know that they need ammunition so if you know this scene this is the one where they're trying to easy companies trying to take the ammunition that these retreating soldiers have because they need as much as they can.

And as they go back and they're passed by all these men one man stops to talk to Dick Winters and he says this it looks like you guys are going to be surrounded and without missing a beat and with a straight face and a monotone Dick simply says we're paratroopers Lieutenant we are supposed to be surrounded as we follow God and return from sin to everything that he's called us to we are supposed to be surrounded if we are not facing opposition then we are not having any impact and so rather than being discouraged we should not be surprised it's naive to believe that we can go on God's mission with him and not face great opposition it's naive to believe that we can go on God's mission and not face discouragement and so as we know that we're going to be surrounded as we know that we're going to face

God's enemies coming up against us what can we do to have the strength and courage to keep moving we see two things that Nehemiah leads his people in first they pray this is the same thing we saw in chapter two that prayer and action go together and so in verse four after this mocking happens the very first thing they do is cry out to God hear oh our God for we are despised turn back their taunt on their own heads and give them up to be plundered in a land where they are captives if this sounds harsh remember two things first Nehemiah is not taking justice into his own hands he's not attacking these people he's not taking a role that belongs to God and giving it to himself instead he's calling out for God to do what God always does to be a great and good judge and second of all he is asking here for

God to do to these people what he has already done to his own people remember that Israel is returning now from exile and being in exile meant that they had been plundered and been in a land where they were captives and so Nehemiah and his people are crying out to God for justice saying when we turned away from your ways you took us into exile and you let us be plundered will you not at least do as much for your enemies it's like a child coming to a parent saying you punished me in such a way when I did this why won't you punish my sibling why do I not get away with this but they do of course the answer is you're the oldest they're the youngest so it's different just kidding but first of all they pray they cry out to God for his help but they don't just pray they work just as we saw before prayer and action go together and so on the one hand they don't just work they don't just put swords in their hands and station guards but they also pray and on the other hand they don't just pray but they also work in station guards and so before we saw that prayer and action go together in general when we return to

[21 : 16] God's ways and here we see not just in general that they go together but that they go together specifically when we face opposition that rather than give in to discouragement and fear we can cry out to God for justice as they do here and then we can turn back to the work he's given us we don't turn back as an act simply of blind faith because not only do we pray and we act but we also know what we've seen before in this book that when we follow God when we are pursuing him and his kingdom when we are looking to bring God's kingdom here on earth just as it is in heaven God's very presence is with us Nehemiah does not just pray but he reminds people in verse 14 that as they face God's enemies God and his character are much much greater and I looked and arose and said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people do not be afraid of them remember the

Lord who is great and awesome we're not just praying and acting but as we face vicious dogs coming after us we know that God has them on a leash and as we face opposition we know that we don't do it alone but God's power and his presence are with us because that is what he's promised and so that's the same thing we see in verse 20 in the place where you hear the sound of the trumpet rally to us there our God will fight for us this is not blind faith that he says because he's already seen it in verse 15 when our enemies heard that it was known to us and that God had frustrated their plan God's presence with his people is not just a pie in the sky presence it's not just a hallmark card encouragement but it is real intervention

God does not take away opposition from his people but he is there with them as we go through it and when we know that he is great and powerful it puts everything else in perspective if you are a Star Wars fan you're familiar with the first scene of a new hope Luke is in the Death Star trench and he's trying to save the rebellion he's being chased by Darth Vader however and it seems that all hope is going to be quickly lost Darth Vader is flying behind him he's already taken out many of the rebel fighters there's not much hope left and then out of nowhere Han Solo shows up in the Millennium Falcon Han Solo takes out everyone who is helping Darth Vader and sends Darth Vader and his ships careening off into space and so as Luke pulls out

Han Solo tells him you're all clear kid let's blow this thing and go home when we face God's enemies we are facing real evil but God is great and awesome and so his power is more devastating it is more secure it is more reliable than anything that our enemies have to offer now we've talked about God and his enemies the fact that we will meet them that they oppose us but the hard truth is that we if we are in Christ if we are following after Jesus we're once God's enemies and if we are not a Christian if we have questions or doubts or objections to

Christianity we are still enemies of God and so the story and the hope that we hold out is not that we are the good guys fighting against the bad guys it is not that we are somehow better than everyone else around us it's not that we're smarter that we understand God's ways we're able to face God's enemies we're able to know his greatness and his power enemies because God is the one who has taken his enemies and made them his friends it's because of Jesus death that he took the punishment that we deserve that he justified us as we talked about earlier in this service his presence is with us not because we are good people but because Jesus was willing to let his enemies crush him and so when we face God's enemies we do it because God wins against his enemies for us because he was willing to let

[26 : 46] God's enemy crush him and so as we talk about the gospel as good news it's not good news that we are asking other people to be good like we're good but it's the good news that no one is good only Jesus is good and so God's presence and his power are with us because not because we are better than others but because God chose through Christ to make his enemies his people and so that's why Paul tells us in Romans chapter 5 that it was while we were enemies that Christ died for us and so that's our hope and our encouragement it's what we cling to as we go out on God's mission because we know that as we seek to have impact as we follow after Jesus it's because of him and his death that we are able to face the opposition that comes against us and so that's our great hope and our prayer and our dream please pray with me dear father in heaven we just thank you for the opportunity to belong to you thank you that you allow us to be a part of your work and your mission in this world we know we don't deserve it we haven't earned it but you give us the privilege of doing it so we thank you we ask that you would use that to encourage us even as we face obstacles and enemies as we pursue your will and your ways we ask all these things in the name of your son amen you and you you you you