

Sermon – 01/02/2009 pm

Threats from the Outside

Study Text: Nehemiah 4:1-9

You have seen how lions carefully watch the herd of deer or antelope looking for a weak animal or a straggler to attack. This is how the Bible pictures the devil. *Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour* (I Peter 5:8). ‘But we cannot see the devil’ you say – and some even deny that he exists. Make no mistake the devil does exist.

The devil can appear in many forms – even as an angel of light. ‘Get behind me Satan’ Jesus said to Peter when Peter told him he did not have to die. The devil commonly appears through his children, through those who reject Christ. Judas was a ready servant of Satan. He, and those who conspired with him, turned upon Jesus. They mock Jesus as they put a fancy robe on him and a thorny crown on his head. Jesus knew all about the scheming of the devil and his methods of attack.

Persecution

Nehemiah knew about opposition also. The Lord took him back to Jerusalem to rebuild the broken down walls of the city. With prayer and active leadership Nehemiah motivated the Jews to unite in repairing the walls. And so the walls began to rise – to the surprise and indignation of the enemies of God’s people. The task was daunting enough in itself as seen in the previous chapter but now this – now the neighbours gather to mock them as they work.

Sanballat from Samaria appears again with his friend in evil Tobiah. When they first got news of Nehemiah’s plan to repair the walls they came and threatened Nehemiah but he was not put off. ‘God will help us’ he said (2:20). Now these fellows make another appearance.

The devil is not easily put off – look at the temptations of Jesus. How many times did he tempt Jesus – three times? If Nehemiah thought he had seen the last of Sanballat he was mistaken. If you think you have seen the last of Satan you are mistaken.

The walls were half built when Sanballat came and started mocking the Jews. He did not come alone. He brought *the army of Samaria* (4:2). Mockers always want an audience. Just what sort of army this was we do not know, but clearly they were trying to scare the Jews. ‘What are these feeble Jews doing’ shouted Sanballat. ‘Who do they think they are? Do they think they can build this wall from the rubble and burnt stone? The stones were probably limestone that had cracked and crumbled in the heat.

Tobiah the Ammonite, standing beside Sanballat, joined in the mocking. ‘That wall is so weak that it will crumble if even a fox walks on it’ he said. You can imagine him and those with him roaring with laughter at this ridicule. Would the Jews be put off? Would they be discouraged? How do feel when people mock and laugh at you? Do you get angry and retaliate? Do we hear verbal retaliation from the Jews building the wall? Nehemiah is there with them but says nothing to Sanballat or Tobiah. What he did was pray.

The enemy left for another while but soon returned. Driven by anger and jealousy they kept on trying to stop the building of the wall. This time Sanballat gathers more allies (4:7). Tobiah was there again with other Ammonites from the east. Arabs from the south and now Ashdodites from the west are present. They conspired to come and attack Jerusalem and create confusion. Verbal attack did not work so they came again in force, prepared to get violent.

Thankfully we are not so familiar with this type of opposition in our churches. Mocking and ridicule is there of course. Richard Dawkins resorts to this sort of opposition when he confronts men who believe the Bible. He is particularly vitriolic when he finds Christians who believe in creation and reject the theory of evolution. There are many, especially in the press, who follow Dawkins in this ridicule and mocking.

But in some places the enemies of Jesus resort to physical attack. They become very angry when anyone converts to Christianity. It is not uncommon for worship services to be interrupted by thugs bursting in. They grab a few people, take them out and beat them with sticks and clubs. In such a manner they try to discourage the Christians. The worshippers usually respond in the way that Nehemiah did – with prayer.

Prayer

In the face of opposition, of mocking and ridicule Nehemiah turned to the Lord in prayer. *Hear, O our God for we are despised* (4:4). He did not enter into debate or engage in a slanging match with his enemies but cried out to the Lord. What did Nehemiah ask God to do? Did he ask God for protection? He actually goes further and asks for vindication. Not personal vindication but divine vindication. Mocking God's people doing God's work was tantamount to mocking God. *They have provoked you to anger before the builders* (4:5). Nehemiah prays for God to turn their insults back on their own heads. He prays that God not forgive but punish these evil doers.

Some condemn this prayer as being less than Christian. It is a prayer of imprecation as found in a number of Psalms and also in the prayer of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 18:23). But let us take care before saying this is Old Testament practice not appropriate to New Testament Christians. Jesus did indeed pray 'Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing' – as did Stephen the martyr. We are to bless those who persecute us and pray for them.

We are not to seek vindication for ourselves. But when it comes to the honour and glory of God is there not a place for righteous anger? God's wrath remains upon those who reject his Son Jesus. God will not be mocked. *Whatever a man sows that he will also reap* (Galatians 6:7). Is this not the truth of Nehemiah's prayer? Nehemiah acknowledged that God was angry because of what Sanballat and company were saying and doing.

Even as we pray for God to be gracious and forgive evil doers we also acknowledge that his wrath is upon sin. God is just and in his justice he will one day destroy his enemies and the enemies of his people. Remember the prayer of the martyrs under the altar in heaven. They (including Stephen?) prayed *how long, O Lord holy and true, until you judge and avenge our blood* (Revelation 6:10). The reply was 'rest a little while longer.

Of course we are to pray for our enemies that they would turn from their evil ways and that the Lord would forgive them. At the same time we should remember and indeed remind them

of the consequences of remaining an enemy of God. It was the apostle Paul in the New Testament who wrote 'God will not be mocked' and 'vengeance is mine says the Lord, I will repay'.

When Sanballat and company returned with the plan of attacking Jerusalem and causing confusion Nehemiah again went to the Lord in prayer. *Nevertheless we made our prayer to God (4:9)*. God had not yet answered his prayer to send them away as captives, but he kept on praying. The enemy grew more threatening but he kept on praying. His earlier prayer for the Lord to prosper the work was being answered. The wall was now half built.

When we face opposition we also must turn to the Lord in prayer. Is this what you have learnt in your life as a child of God? I say learnt because it is not our natural response. When we are mocked we take it personally. We get upset. We get angry and we are prone to respond in like manner. We must learn not respond in like manner.

We must learn not to react like this but to turn to the Lord in prayer. As a child of God go to your heavenly Father and ask him to sort things out. Remember you were once an enemy of God but God in his grace forgave your sin.

Prepare

Despite the opposition the building work continued. *So we built the wall (4:6)*. They prayed and went back to work. They left all vengeance in the hands of the Lord. *For the people had a mind to work (4:6)*. We have already seen how they were united in the task and they kept on in this unity. They were not divided as their enemy was hoping. There was no falling away through fear. They were working as unto the Lord. No one was forcing them to work and no one could make them stop work – for they had a mind to work. May such words be said of us as we engage in the Lord's work.

Prayer does not preclude action. We know Nehemiah as a man of prayer as well as a man of action – of prayer and preparation. The first thing he did in the face of opposition was pray but he did not stop there. He did not just sit down and wait for the Lord to 'send down fire from heaven'. He set a watch day and night to keep an eye on the enemy (4:9). He took precautions. He prayed and he set a watch against them.

Jesus teaches us the same thing. He says watch and pray (Luke 21:36). We must be alert to the scheming of the devil. He is prowling around looking for an easy target. He looks for one falling back from the body, one tempted to wander off. He is looking for one neglecting the means of grace, one tempted to go after the things of the world. Stay within the body. Stay close to your Lord. Stand firm in the truth and power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

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