

**Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> May 2022**  
**Nehemiah 4:1-23**  
**Mr.Brent Haywood**  
**Brightons Parish Church**

Lord, as we prayed, may any words that come from this pulpit that are not of You be cast aside like dust and may the words of Your Holy Spirit, that are from You, go deep into our hearts this day, we pray. Amen.

When speakers start sermons, they often play a clever opening line or they might come up with a joke or something that kind of draws people in to what they're going to say. Now, I think Scott is an expert at that but he's learnt from the master because Jesus taught in parables, Jesus taught in stories. Well, I'm sorry, nothing clever from me today, all my creative efforts are on the floor.

I want to start heavy okay, because chapter 4 of Nehemiah is an incredible chapter and I think it deals with evil. So, I want to ask you three questions that you do not need to answer to your neighbor but I want to just put those questions to you now as we think about this chapter:

- Do you believe in this thing called evil?
- Do you believe in the devil? Do you believe in the satan?
- Do you believe that there are unseen forces in the world, unseen evil forces even around Brightons and Falkirk?

Heavy questions and questions with no context. We'll hold those as we get and start to look at this chapter.

But, you know, we're four weeks into Nehemiah and I can't help thinking that we need a bit of a recap.

Nehemiah, we remember that the story of Nehemiah and Ezra, the book before it, are set at the end of exile. Exile is one of the big themes of the Old Testament. Way back in Exodus, Moses is telling the children of Israel what God is saying and it's kind of simple in some respects - follow God's ways, things will work out; don't follow God's ways, there will be consequences. And so, what we then see through Exodus, Leviticus on, we go into the Kings and the Chronicles, what happens? The children of Israel just cannot obey, they just cannot obey, and repeatedly they're warned and then eventually the consequences follow, and the twelve tribes of the north are scattered and the two tribes of the south, eventually, Jerusalem is attacked the walls fall down the temple is destroyed and they're carted off to Babylon.

And so, we pick up the story again upon the return. But upon the return things are still a little bit disappointing, because the temple is rebuilt and well it's not quite as good as the previous temple and, get this, they spend the good part of 60, 80 years with Jerusalem in a shambles, a complete shambles, The walls are broken down, people come in and out, trade doesn't work because there's no security, there's no sense of community, it's a mess. So one of the questions I ask myself which we won't talk on today is 'Why did the people in Jerusalem not get on with this themselves? Why did it need a Nehemiah to be called and to come and help them?

I put that to one side.

But let's think about this extraordinary construction project. It's extraordinary because, what we were learning last week was, it was all being put together by people who were completely unskilled, completely unskilled at building walls. But what happens? Well, we've got three weeks of thinking that the story is quite good, we've got three weeks of thinking 'Nehemiah, that's a good book for us to study as we come out of the pandemic because it's about rebuilding.' and Scott our minister has been talking about the rebuilding that we need to be doing locally and this is a good book because it's all going well.

I've got news for you today. As George read, the news wasn't all good because there was so much opposition, and we face opposition. But, from this chapter, I want to draw out four types of opposition that Nehemiah and his crew in Jerusalem were facing: **ridicule, intimidation, discouragement and fear**. So, we'll jog our way through each of those and see whether there's application for us when it comes to that today.

First of all, **ridicule**. If you've, if you're near a Bible I'd encourage you to open it, we're on page 487, because I'm going to be taking bits out and reading through. And the first bit I want to read is this bit that George started with, that big deep breath and chat at the start of chapter four 'When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria he said 'What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish it in the day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble?' Bits of leg! 'Tobiah the Ammonite who was at his side said 'What they're building, if even a fox climbed up on it then he would break down their wall of stones.' Ridicule! Now, we touched on this a little bit last week so I'm not going to go too far into it but I think Christians get what ridicule is, particularly today, in the world of social media, it's out there everywhere, it's so easy to ridicule and still in this day Christians cop it more than most others because they're an easy target. You bunch of wet, bleeding-hearted Christians, nicely settled in your religious bubble, wet and wimpy. It's got to the point where Christianity is labeled as a bigots religion and it's got to the point, bizarrely, where Christianity is regarded by the world as immoral. Oh, I think that's an extraordinary flip by the enemy and I think we've only seen it in the last few years. But what, it's easy to then become defensive about all this stuff isn't it?

What's Nehemiah's response to the ridicule? Have a look at verse four. Now this is a really tough prayer. It's known in the Bible that by the fancy word of an imprecatory prayer. It's a prayer which is calling God's judgment on an enemy and we get very nervous about talking about those sorts of prayers in the Bible but if you take any time to read the book of Psalms you'll see it there all the time. But let me read Nehemiah's prayer verse 4 'Hear us, oh our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in the land of captivity. Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders.'

I don't know what your prayer life is like but I'm a bit reluctant to pray that bravely, that God might keep His judgment down on my enemies, but it's there and you know what, we all prayed that this morning already. What do you think in the Lord's Prayer those words 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven' actually means? It means that we want God's justice, the justice of the heavens, to also be played out on earth and if you take that forward, that has consequences.

Now, we have to be very careful about how we pray those sorts of prayers but it's there and there's a lot of learning to take from it. It could be a whole sermon series, don't worry, the clock's back, I won't be that long,

God is a God of justice, and evil will have its day of reckoning.

Now, we have to move on verse six.

'So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height for the people worked with all their heart.' The people worked with all their heart. I love that simple phrase. Isn't it good when people work with all their heart? Nice and simple. But the problems are still going on throughout the chapter.

The second one, **intimidation**. If we look and see what happens down in verses seven and eight when Samballat, Tobiah and the Arabs, and the Ammonites and the men of Ashdod heard that the repairs of Jerusalem's walls had gone ahead and that the gaps were being closed, they were very angry and they plotted together to come and to fight against Jerusalem and to stir up trouble against it.' Now, I don't think we need too much imagination to see what that looks like because our screens have been full of it in recent months in the Ukraine but I think we've become dulled to all of those atrocities, and we need to think more deeply on what intimidation looks like. This is the magazine Barnabas Aid, you often see copies at the front of the church and many of us read it. Its strapline says 'Bringing hope and aid to suffering Christians' and it's a magazine that shares good stories, good news stories about people in the suffering church around the world, but it also has horrendous stories in it. Stories of Christians who are stopped from worshipping, who are intimidated, Christians who are killed.

If you're a Christian in China or a Christian in Pakistan you read this Bible very differently and with a very different lens to we might read it here. If you're a Christian in Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, if you've got one of these you hide it. We don't know what intimidation is to some extent but there is intimidation in Scotland.

The Free Church in Stirling was kicked out of its accommodation, its rented accommodation, because its landlord had the view that they didn't fancy that church's teaching on marriage, Now, that case was challenged and thankfully the law of the land found in their favor. Or the street pastor in Glasgow, bundled into a police van in Buchanan Street because he's simply reading the Bible in public and being processed, not for a crime, not for a crime, but for a hate incident and so he's registered, and he has a not a criminal record but a police record, for preaching the gospel on Buchanan

Street. Now that's been challenged as well. Or even closer to home, the good folk at Grace Church, Larbert wanting to embark on a building program were horrendously intimidated and told that they were bigots because they had a homophobic attitude. Not true. But the intimidation that that church, just in our area, has had is absolutely incredible. Now I'm tempering, okay I'm tempering what's happened overseas with Christians intimidated and killed, with the type of intimidation we get here but it's real and we can too easily cower and stay away from it.

Verse 8 'they plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it.' Well how do you face intimidation? What did they do? You're probably not going to be surprised by the answer - verse 9 'But we prayed to our God and we posted a guard day and night to meet the threat.' Prayer and action. These are just such consistent themes throughout Nehemiah. Nehemiah is a leader and he is consistent in prayer. Prayer before action. And that's what we're talking about today because it builds on the last three sermons we've heard this that this man started with prayer 'they prayed and posted a guard.' Prayer and action.

But the enemy's still not beat, is it?

And in verse 10 and verse 11, verse 12 we read that 'Meantime, the people in Judah said 'The strength of the labourers is giving out and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall.' Also our enemies said 'Before they know it or see it or see us we will be right there amongst them and we will kill them and put an end to the work. Then the Jews who lived near where they came and they told us 10 times over 'Whatever you turn, wherever you turn,,' they will attack us

So here it comes, old discouragement. Now, I don't know about you, if you want to discourage me you don't need to tell me something 10 times over. The Jewish trends, the Hebrew translation there is that they were being told time and time and time and time again that this just couldn't be done. For me, just tell me once or twice that I can't do it, that'll encourage me, that'll discourage m, I mean.

But what's all this about?

There's a change, if you can see, between mockery and intimidation which are all external, to discouragement which is inside the camp, which is a real cancerous way of getting it people. Now, to be fair, to be fair, these detractors, they probably had a point because as construction projects go well, it wasn't exactly the easiest. 150 years of rubble, trying to rebuild the wall. I was worried that the kids were going to start pulling the Lego about up to bits and take it and I reckon we'd have been here till 5 o'clock building it there. Building, rebuilding in rubble is not fun, and the picture that we have of the project is that it's basically being opposed by everybody inside and out and you can kind of hear that you can kind of hear that conversation with Nehemiah 'Listen laddie, that's not how we do around here. You needn't think that this building project is going to be successful. Not only that, look at our labourers, they're all tired, they can't do it anymore.

So, discouragement then leads to that fourth tactic of the enemy, **fear**.

Ridicule, intimidation, discouragement - fear, I think sometimes is like the ultimate enemy. It's contagious and it can paralyze us. Indeed, Annabella was praying that just before I started to speak. So the passage is not teaching us to ignore fear but it is teaching us how it affects us and how we can tackle it. It teaches us to face fear. If you look at Nehemiah verse 13 onwards 'Therefore in face of what was going on he said I stationed some of the people behind the lowest points on the wall at the exposed places posting them by families with their swords, spears and bows and after I looked things over I stood up and I said to the nobles and the officials and to the rest of the people 'Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord who is great and awesome.' Remember the Lord who is great and awesome.

Now, this is no Churchill rallying cry, this is no President Zelenski, land of hope and glory, rally round the flag, we can do it. It's not like that at all. The focus is on God who is great and awesome. Then down in verse 20 he says 'For our God will fight for us.' Same theme - prayer and action - prayer and action. And I want you to see that Nehemiah is not naïve. This is a hard job. It's a struggle, but he leads with faith, not faith in flesh and blood, but faith in God.

Now, all of us face situations which create fear in our heart and, like I say, it's paralyzing. As I use the word 'fear' I can almost paralyze myself. It doesn't need to be great matters of state, it doesn't mean that that we are facing a church that's under real attack, it's an everyday stuff. The stuff that we muddle away through. Fear about things in family, in our place of work, money worries, health worries, just the general disappointments of life. We know that. We know we face fears constantly.

Someone here today who often quotes to me that verse in James 'perfect love drives out fear' perfect love drives out fear. That love is the love of the Lord Jesus Christ. So, it seems to me that when we look at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, we are just like those people in Jerusalem and we are trying to rebuild, in a time just beyond the exile, the temple is rebuilt but it's just not what it used to be and the wall, the walls of our nation, the walls of our church.

I cut a lot out of my sermon last night because I was gonna say things about the nation and I was gonna say things about our church but I'm a guest in this pulpit and that is not my role. You can have that conversation with me later but is it not fair to say we are living in rubble. Broken bits of Lego everywhere.

But Nehemiah's words and his character, they lead me to say something else to us today. At this moment, amid the rubble in God's goodness, we have a hard-working and motivated Nehemiah with us in our presence. You don't need to look around, he's not in the building today. And actually, he couldn't speak these words from the pulpit, so let me speak very, very plainly. Repeatedly, you have heard our minister referring to his calling in this congregation. Repeatedly and from the very beginning of his time with us

he has challenged us to have a vision. Keith's out with the kids but during vacancy, Keith repeatedly said to us where there is no vision, that people perish, words from the Old Testament. Scott, he's worked with us to consider our purpose and our values that underpin our vision. Repeatedly he's called us to pray, to be a praying people. Repeatedly, like Nehemiah, he's surveyed the job at hand and he's challenged us on the state of our walls. Just last week, he was calling for volunteers because there's work to be done, the walls need built.

I see him ridiculed. I see him intimidated. I see him undermined by naysayers. Lord, forgive me, I've probably been one of those people who's been a naysayer. And don't get me wrong, our minister is not perfect, nobody's perfect, Jesus was perfect, but can I urge you, can I urge you to pray for our minister, reflect on how we're treating our spiritual leader. Hebrews says this, Hebrews chapter 13 towards the end 'Remember your leaders who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.'

Now it's not just about Scott. All of us are leaders. All of us are to imitate. Paul says 'Be imitators of me as I am imitators of Christ.' Nehemiah didn't get the job done on his own. Let us think about having the trowel and the sword, that picture from Nehemiah, so that we're working and we're praying. Let us recognize that there is an enemy. Sure, things come along but there is a spiritual enemy because one of the great themes of the Bible is that God's people face opposition. Right at the beginning of the Bible whatever you make of the story of the Garden of Eden and the serpent, that is the Satan. All the way through the Bible. And the only way that God's people conquer evil is through the saving grace of Jesus Christ. Paul knew this we. We touched on this at the prayer meeting on Thursday night. Paul in Ephesians says 'This our struggle, it's not against flesh and blood' and that is hard to see isn't it. Sometimes we just think our struggles are about the things that are actually in front of us but Paul says 'our struggles are not against flesh and blood but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.'

These things are real. Real evil forces. And if you try to confront ridicule and intimidation and discouragement and fear without that understanding, the reality that there are unseen forces and that we need to be on our knees, whether literally or metaphorically, in prayer, you're gonna fail, you're gonna fail.

Paul ends that passage in Ephesians with this 'and pray in the spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert.' I love that word, Christians should be alert. I think alert is a modern word. I think it's a word that says, be on your guard, be ready. We need to be alert people - prayer and action.

My time's up. There's so much more in this chapter. I'd encourage you to get into it. I'd encourage you to keep reading Nehemiah as we're in the series, because it's so rich. Think about those people in Jerusalem. Why were they so lame? Why were they so ineffective? Why did they do nothing for nearly 100 years after the exile, and had this

city that was just a shambles? That needed Nehemiah? They could have done this job without Nehemiah and God's grace he sent him but why?

Let me close there, but as we go into singing our final song 'An army of ordinary people' let's sing that to the Lord with a sense of inspiration. We are an army of ordinary people, a kingdom where love is the key.