

Nehemiah 4:1–23

5. The servant's confidence

Once the labourers started work on the building-site, Nehemiah's troubles began in earnest. Earlier tensions were dwarfed by fierce opposition. Optimism and realism are sensitively combined in his dramatic narrative. The team needs not only their leader's vigorous assurance that the God of heaven would give them success (2:20) but also his sensitive compassion, *Don't be afraid* (14).

The essential qualities of leadership are strength and love . Some leaders are persuasive, definite, strong and assertive, and it is unwise to get in their way; they have evident power, but love is in short supply. Others are attractively compassionate, almost to a fault, tolerating anything, fearful lest they 'rock the boat', but sometimes lacking the decisive dynamic that is necessary in effective leadership.¹

Although by nature a sturdy extrovert, Nehemiah endeavoured to balance strength with love. If his narrative appears to portray a man more powerful than loving, it is largely because the story is set in the arena of sustained hostility. He is fighting for Israel's continuing spiritual existence, but he is not without compassion. He honestly recalls his own experience of intense fear in the palace at Susa (2:2) and can sympathize with the terrified. This leader knows how to come alongside discouraged (10), fearful (11), vulnerable (12) and deprived (5:1–6) people with emotional tenderness as well as moral strength.

Before a few days have gone by, Nehemiah and his colleagues realize that they are in serious trouble. There is opposition outside the ranks (1–9) and depression within (10–23) . Yet, however intense, adversity is never a solitary visitor to the soul. Paul believed that trouble enables discerning Christians to unearth hidden treasure.² Blessings emerge in affliction which are rarely found in periods of ease.

Sorrow is not purposeless if it drives us to God, increases our dependence on him, enhances our sensitivity to the needs of others and makes us more like Jesus . Christ told his followers that they were unlikely to escape trouble³ and mature believers prefer

¹ Paul knew the importance of both qualities, [Rom. 1:11–12](#).

² [2 Cor. 1:3–11](#).

rather to learn from adversity than bemoan it.

As Nehemiah shares his reaction to the malevolent events of those weeks, his narrative reveals six basic principles which determined his planning, caring, teaching and working in the context of repeated affliction.

1. Conflict is inevitable (4:1–3)

As the work gets under way, the leader is bombarded with trouble from different angles. Initially, trouble comes from outside the ranks; that menacing duo resume the opposition. Sanballat, *angry* and *greatly incensed* about the excellent start made on Jerusalem's walls, *ridiculed* the workers (1) and, before long, his friend Tobiah was *at his side* with further undermining taunts and destructive derision (3). The verbal onslaughts are followed by menacing plots to *fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it* (8). These men know that if they are to wreck the project, damaging words must be supplemented with dangerous weapons.

Then, as if that is not enough, there is trouble from within the ranks. The team is demoralized; the labourers and their families from the surrounding countryside become disheartened in the work and terrorized by the enemy.

The opposition of Nehemiah's enemies intensifies as time goes on. When they first hear why Nehemiah has come to Jerusalem they are 'very much disturbed' (2:10), then mildly amused (2:19) that he has devised such a ridiculously ambitious programme. Once they witness his determination, it is no longer a laughing matter. They begin to impute wrong motives and are intent on bringing him down in the king's eyes (2:19). Now the initial irritation turns to sustained anger and the enemy is *greatly incensed* (1) . Sanballat gathers further allies about him and, employing fierce bullying tactics, approaches Jerusalem with a substantial military escort. It is one thing for the builders to hear his taunts but quite another to see his troops. To look up from their work on the walls and see the *army of Samaria* (2) marching towards the city was enough to horrify all but the stoutest members of the team.

The scorn continued as the enemy belittled their qualities (*feeble Jews*), derided their ambitions (*Will they restore their wall?*), mocked their optimism (*Will they offer sacrifices?*, *i.e.* of thanksgiving and dedication when the wall is rebuilt), lampooned their enthusiasm (*Will they finish it in a day?*), undermined their confidence (*Can they bring*

the stones back to life?) and magnified their problems (*those heaps of rubble—burned as they are*).

Tobiah joins in the ridicule, demeaning their efforts. He relieves his annoyance by channelling the bitterness into a sick joke: *What they are building—if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones* (3). Kathleen Kenyon's archaeological excavations on Nehemiah's walls revealed that they were nine foot thick. Although not as sturdy as the previous wall, it would need more than a few robust foxes to demolish it. Tobiah hoped that his sick humour might cause the builders to cast an apprehensive glance at their hard work and so activate an avalanche of discouragement. Laughter is a choice blessing but it can be a dangerous weapon. If one's laughter produces another's tears, the humour is misplaced.

But Tobiah planned for more than tears. Nehemiah was up against formidable antagonism; his enemies were intent on the total ruination of his imaginative and well-organized undertaking. Anyone working for God can anticipate opposition in some form or other. ⁴ When the sightless Saul of Tarsus reached Damascus, his initiation into Christian life and experience included a realistic note about 'how much he must suffer' for Christ, and he went on to warn his earliest converts that they too 'must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God'.⁴ Suffering is the badge of discipleship; taking up the cross authenticates the reality of faith. Yet, however intense the opposition, the believer is not without resources, and they are released in reliant prayer ⁴.

2. Prayer is crucial (4:4–9)

The next section of the narrative begins with a personal prayer of Nehemiah on behalf of the people, and ends with corporate prayer by the people.

a. The leader prays

Hear us, O our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a 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 (4–5).

Nehemiah's response to the enemy's assaults is to turn to God.

⁴ Acts 9:16; 14:22.

He prayed *urgently*. Nehemiah's response to this sustained adversity is to hurry into the audience chamber of God. In the presence of his opponents he had declared his conviction that the God of heaven would give success to the builders (2:20) but that must be more than an inspiring rallying cry; heaven's Lord must be sought for earth's needs. His God is acknowledged not only as the source of ultimate success but the Giver of immediate help. In turning to the Lord, Nehemiah knew that there was nowhere else he could go.

He prayed *honestly*. Nehemiah was angry about their ridicule. They had *despised* the workers and poured *insults* on their heads. Nehemiah cannot contain his fury and the exasperation spills out in fervent prayer. He does not need to choose his words carefully. He is in the presence of One who knows the reason for his indignation. There are times when, bewildered and distressed, we cry out in anguish to God, telling him exactly how we feel, as in those experiences when we are pained that he does not seem to answer our prayers or respond to our cry as speedily as we had hoped. It is best to be honest with God. When we are aggrieved, it is better to pray honestly and express our pain in the holy place than harbour resentment and disdain prayer. Moreover, if fierce anger needs to be released it is far better expressed in prayer than in uncontrolled bitterness towards others. 🗨️

He prayed *passionately*. Nehemiah's prayer is an unbridled expression of turbulent emotions and he cannot conceal his fury. Imprecatory prayers of this kind 'have the shocking immediacy of a scream, to startle us into feeling something of the desperation which produced them'.⁵ He has been attacked personally and his motives challenged. Few people can cope with fierce verbal criticism. But, more seriously, his enemies have sinned against God (by opposing his work) and God's people (by maligning their efforts) and Nehemiah does not want their sin to be overlooked: *Do not ... blot out their sins*.

In the face of his enemies' resolute animosity, it is natural for Nehemiah to speak in this way and, although from our vantage point he would want to pray differently, it is important for us to empathize with him, not criticize him. Christians react to cruelty and injustice in the light of two great biblical events which Nehemiah could not possibly discern as clearly as we can—the death of Christ and the life to come. 🗨️ Comment-

⁵ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary (Leicester: IVP, 1973), p. 28.

ing on this type of angry prayer in psalmody, Kidner says that to understand such prayers,

... we should have to suspend our consciousness of having a gospel to impart (which affects our attitude to fellow-sinners) and our assurance of a final righting of wrongs (which affects our attitude to present anomalies). Without these certainties, only a cynic could feel no impatience to see justice triumphant and evil men broken.⁶

Nehemiah prayed *realistically*. It would be a mistake to dismiss his vehement prayer as an expression of uncontrolled human indignation. He regards their insults as an offence against God, which indeed they are. They have ridiculed a venture which God inspired and planned. They have not merely reviled God's servants; they have abused God's Name. In calling upon God so passionately, Nehemiah is asking God not to vindicate the workers but to authenticate his truth in the presence of such irreverent and insulting opponents. When God's honour is at stake, it is natural that a man as surrendered and devoted as Nehemiah should be incensed.

The memory of earlier biblical experience may have helped Nehemiah in his moment of crisis. Unexpectedly confronted by Samaria's soldiers, he may even have recalled Hezekiah's prayer at those very walls as Judah's king had sought deliverance from the Assyrian aggressors who had come 'to insult the living God'.⁷ His language is markedly reminiscent of the anguished prayers of Jeremiah when he was taunted and persecuted by his threatening neighbours.⁸ 'The cry of vengeance is a cry for justice,' comments Holmgren.⁹ There is a place for righteous anger.

C. S. Lewis observed that in some circumstances,

the absence of anger is a most alarming symptom and the presence of indignation may be a good one. For if we look at their railings we find they are usually angry not simply because these things have been done to them but because these things are manifestly wrong, are hateful to God as well as to the victim .¹⁰

⁶ Ibid., p. 26.

⁷ 2 Ki. 19:14–19.

⁸ Je. 17:18; 18:21–23.

⁹ Holmgren, p. 106.

¹⁰ C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1958), p. 30.

Jesus was angry at times. He was angry at the beginning of his ministry when he confronted the loveless legalism of his synagogue opponents and also, at the close of his life, when he witnessed the greedy commercialism of the temple traders.¹¹ Paul maintained that there is a form of anger which is not sinful: ‘In your anger do not sin’. In the right context the anger needs to be expressed. It must not be turned inward and pent up within us; if it is allowed to fester it can damage us. When anger is not handled correctly the offended person can become an offender. That is why the apostle insists that even when those who make us angry do not seek our forgiveness, we must cultivate a forgiving spirit towards them. Sleep ought to bring all anger to the place of rest: ‘Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry’.¹²

Nehemiah’s prayer is descriptive not prescriptive . In his prayer life Nehemiah needed Jesus just as much as we do. Nehemiah was confident of the ‘God of heaven’ and, similarly, Jesus told his disciples to pray to their ‘Father in heaven’. Christ also taught them and us to ‘forgive everyone who sins against us’, even to pray for our enemies and those who insult us,¹³ though Clines reminds us that ‘the Christian magistrate’ (to whom, as governor, Nehemiah corresponds) ‘may not always be called upon to exercise forgiveness to law-breakers and invaders’.¹⁴

Nehemiah prayed dependently: *Hear us, O our God*. It is the heart cry of a man in desperate need. The project has reached a crucial stage. The wall has been built to *half its height* and so much dedicated energy has gone into the enterprise, *for the people worked with all their heart* (6). It would be disastrous if, demoralized by Sanballat’s ridicule, discouraged by Tobiah’s taunts and frightened by Samaria’s soldiers, the builders gave up, especially when so much had been accomplished. Only God could save them from discouragement and disaster. That is why Nehemiah prayed. He knew that between his despondent workers and their potential failure were God’s abundant resources; immeasurable supplies are released through dependent prayer.

b. The workers pray

¹¹ Mk. 3:5; 11:15–17.

¹² Eph. 4:26.

¹³ Mt. 6:9; Lk. 11:4; Mt. 5:11, 43–44.

¹⁴ Clines, p. 160.

Nehemiah's colleagues also sought God in prayer. They, as well as their dependent leader, had every reason to cry to the Lord: *But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat* (9). The earnest petition of leader and people continue to teach us about prayer—its necessity, naturalness, partnership and comfort.

These people believed in *the necessity of prayer*. The enemies united as they laid destructive plots to overthrow the work. Sanballat from the north, Tobiah and the Ammonites from the east, the Arabs from the south and the Ashdodites from the west meant that Jerusalem was virtually encircled by vicious enemies, fiercely intent on damaging the cause. *They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. But we prayed ...* (8–9).

There is something here about *the naturalness of prayer*. Under serious threat and in extreme adversity it was the most logical thing for them to do. There was so much that they were unable to do. They could not forget the ridicule, dismiss the danger, ignore the plots or scatter the soldiers, but they could pray, and pray they did. It was natural for them to do so, for in prayer they were affirming their faith, sharing their anxieties, acknowledging their weakness and confessing their need.

This threatened team of builders believed in *the partnership of prayer*: 'We prayed to our God'—expressing their unity and corporate reliance. Like their building work, their praying was a further corporate activity in which they could help one another.

Jerusalem's builders valued *the comfort of prayer*. They described their Lord as *our God*, the God of infinite wisdom (he knew what to do), compassionate care (he wanted to help them), limitless power (nothing daunted him), and available resources—everything they needed was there for the asking. No wonder they prayed.

3. Discouragement is understandable (4:10–12)

The realism of Scripture is one of its many attractive features. These Old Testament stories were 'written to teach us', so that through the endurance which God inspires and 'the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope'.¹⁵ The Bible does not confront us with an idealistic portraiture of life. Imagine this story of Nehemiah's ambitious enterprise totally without problems or difficulties. It would dishearten us rather than inspire us, for it would be describing a world totally different from our own. Life is

¹⁵ Rom. 15:4–5.

tough at times and, however much we pray, its trouble can increase rather than decrease. Prayer is not a convenient device for removing life's problems but a loving God's provision for coping with them. 📌 Nehemiah describes his five-fold problem at this crucial stage of the project.

a. The extent of the discouragement

Jerusalem's workers had more than enough to cope with, surrounded by enemies and threatened with disaster, and now there is additional trouble. The *people in Judah*, men and women from the surrounding towns and villages, came to Nehemiah describing not only the depressing working conditions in the city but grieved also about the dangers to which their families were exposed in the countryside. Jerusalem's workers are not the only people in danger. The enemies have threatened to attack the homes of those Judeans whose menfolk were away from home working on the city walls. Nehemiah's problems are far from localized; they have spread from the city to the wider life of the Judean community.

b. The exhaustion of the workers

Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, 'The strength of the labourers is giving out' (10). That expression *giving out* comes from a verb meaning 'to stumble' or 'totter' as in Isaiah's exposure, 'Jerusalem staggers, Judah is falling'.¹⁶ It is a vivid picture of an exhausted labourer, reeling under the heavy load he is trying to carry. They had been working for several weeks and, under the pressure of external opposition, the initial enthusiasm was beginning to wane. It is always easier to begin a work for God than continue it. Perseverance is a rich and rare quality, especially when we feel physically tired and spent. Anyone seriously committed to the work of Christ can sympathize with these sighing people. 📌

In time of acute depression, the prophet Elijah felt it impossible to carry on: 'I have had enough, LORD.' His trouble doubtless had its roots in physical and nervous exhaustion. Depression always distorts reality; it throws everything out of perspective. He wished he might die, but God's angel began by providing the worn-out prophet with

¹⁶ Is. 3:8.

essential food and refreshing sleep. How badly he needed it, because as soon as he had eaten the meal he went off to sleep again. Only when he had eaten a further meal was he encouraged to continue his journey.¹⁷ The Lord knows our needs ('the journey is too much for you', he said to Elijah), and does not want us to put excessive pressure on our physical and emotional resources. We were never meant to push ourselves to the extreme limit of our natural energies. Our strength must be replenished with adequate rest and good food. That is one of the reasons why God included a weekly rest day in the covenant he made with his people. We were never designed to live without restorative relaxation. His prescribed lifestyle, embodied in the Ten Commandments, focused on the interrelated elements of honouring God, loving others and caring for ourselves. ✎

c. The immensity of the enterprise

When the labourers began, it seemed such an exciting thing to be doing, but as the weeks went by they became increasingly overwhelmed by the daunting practicalities. Huge stones and a seemingly vast amount of debris had to be cleared away (2:14) before they could continue the extensive building operation. The Babylonian armies had ruined Jerusalem's walls and damaged the many houses attached to them: *there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall* (10).

That doleful *we cannot* has destroyed many an imaginative Christian objective. It has been said that in the history of the church, pessimism has always been a greater problem than atheism. On the threshold of Canaan the fearful travellers said they could not possibly enter the new land. They concentrated on their weakness rather than God's strength. Nehemiah had to persuade his rubble-rousers not to make the same mistake. The labourers' strength might well be giving out but God's power was available, sufficient and inexhaustible. ✎

d. The aggression of the opponents

This was yet another intimidating dimension of their trouble. People in both urban and rural contexts were paralysed with fear when new threats came from their enemies. The hostility of the opponents was directed both at the city's builders and at their homes in

¹⁷ 1 Ki. 19:3–9.

the Judean countryside.

First, the builders were demoralized by the threat of a surprise attack as they worked on the walls: *Also our enemies said, 'Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work'* (11). The strenuous effort involved in removing vast piles of rubble and carrying it outside the city was hard and difficult enough. Now they are told that they will be slaughtered whilst doing it.

Secondly, people in other parts of the province were in equal danger. The women of Judah, whose husbands had left home to work on the walls, were terror-stricken. *Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, 'Wherever you turn, they will attack us'* (12). The Hebrew here in verse 12 can be translated as a plea from the Judeans urging their husbands to return home. In view of the actual danger to which the builders were exposed in the city and the potential danger their wives and children might be in if their homes were unprotected, they were in effect saying, 'You must return to us', that is, to save yourselves and to defend us. Alternatively, it may be that the Judeans were urging their fellow-countrymen to abandon work on the walls simply because, in the light of physical exhaustion, practical problems (extensive rubble) and hostile opponents, they considered it an unattainable enterprise.

e. The fear of the participants

In the light of all these troubles, fear was a major difficulty. Some of *the Jews who lived near* Nehemiah's enemies were constantly harassed by fresh threats and increasing intimidation. Their hostile neighbours robbed them of peace, and fear spread quickly among the harrassed people. The dedicated leader knew that, in addition to earnest prayer, the situation called for radical action. The crisis underlined the crucial importance of a united team.

4. Unity is essential (4:13–20)

Keenly aware of such intense discouragement, Nehemiah devised a strategy to meet the immediate crisis.

First, he mobilized his team by making sure that the most vulnerable parts of the wall were protected by appointed guards. As an emergency measure he *stationed some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families,*

with their swords, spears and bows (13). Members of extended families knew each other well enough to allocate respective duties effectively, and the presence of their women and children close at hand was a constant reminder that they were not simply fighting for the city's walls but for the family's and community's future. Posting these emergency troops at *the lowest points of the wall* ensured that the menacing enemy could see that Jerusalem's militia was a force to be reckoned with.

Secondly, Nehemiah considered his options. It was a time for some kind of public assembly but first he *looked things over*. He was not a man for hasty, ill-considered actions. Before he did anything else he went to see how the emergency troops were getting on. Christ's work is sometimes spoilt because things are done hurriedly and without careful consideration of the likely consequences. Mark tells that when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem at the beginning of that last eventful week of his public ministry, he went to the temple and 'looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve'.¹⁸ He saw merchants' tables and the money-changers' booths, but it was not the right time to overturn those tables and address those who were so blatantly misusing the temple. Although he was profoundly disturbed by what he saw, he was in full control of his emotions. It was a time to think but not to act. Action was best delayed to the following day when there would be a more opportune occasion for the exposure of their sins. Only after he had *looked things over* did Nehemiah summon together *the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people* (14a).

Thirdly, Nehemiah shared his faith. He *stood up* in a public assembly and urged the people, '*Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes*' (14b).

Their leader knew what it was to be overcome with terror (2:2). He could enter sympathetically into the fears of his colleagues, but he also believed that fear is conquered by reflecting on the sufficiency of God: Remember the Lord. Nehemiah uses the words of his opening prayer (1:5), when he first heard of Jerusalem's plight. Now he is leading the venture in the city he reminds himself and his contemporaries of the uniqueness, power (*great*) and holiness (*awesome*) of God. The Lord had promised to meet the needs of his people, however serious their adversities, and would not go back on his word. Their circumstances had changed, the work was more difficult and the enemy more active,

¹⁸ Mk. 11:11.

but the Lord was exactly the same. They must *remember* God. We are astonished that Nehemiah could even suggest that they might forget God but, in time of crisis, they could—and so can we. In his last letter before execution, Paul urged his colleague Timothy to ‘Remember Jesus Christ’.¹⁹ Did the apostle really imagine that this dedicated young minister could ever forget Jesus, the source of his life, the secret of his strength and the substance of his preaching? But when trouble comes, Scripture’s great realities can be temporarily displaced by anxious thoughts. Believers often need that timely reminder. ✎

Fourthly, Nehemiah announced his plans. The highly visible emergency protection force had alerted the enemy to their efficient organization and military strength. The plot for the surprise attack had been foiled. Nehemiah believed it was now safe for the builders to return to their allocated work-areas on the walls. The leader made sure that, from now on, the entire work force was permanently and efficiently protected so he divided his team into builders and soldiers: *From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armour (16)*. Even the labourers who carried rubble away from the city were supplied with armour and *did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other (17)*. Each of the builders was equipped with *his sword at his side as he worked (18)*.

To ensure that builders, labourers and residents were aware of approaching danger, their leader devised a temporary warning system. A trumpeter stayed by Nehemiah’s side so that the troops could be quickly gathered together at the place of most urgent need: *Whenever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there*. Nehemiah thought of everything.

5. Sacrifice is inescapable (4:21–23)

But, although Nehemiah made careful plans to meet every possible emergency, his organizing ability would have been useless without the radical sacrificial involvement of both leader and people. The work continued throughout every available moment of the entire day, *from the first light of dawn till the stars came out (21)*. Normal siesta times were ignored because every worker knew that the wall was not required merely to enhance Jerusalem’s architecture or beautify its physical appearance; those well-forti-

¹⁹ 2 Tim. 2:8.

fied defences and strong gates were vital for future security. People who lived in nearby villages no longer went home to sleep, but stayed within the city's slowly rising walls so that they could serve *as guards by night and workmen by day* (22). Nehemiah, his brothers and his personal escort set a choice example to the rest of the workers. They even slept in their clothes so that they were fully dressed and ready at the moment of attack.

The story of Christ's church across the centuries is a chronicle of exemplary heroism and sacrificial service. Many of the outstanding personalities of Christian history had to cope with immense hardship of one kind or another. They too proved that there was no service without suffering. Their remarkable achievements are well known but their inward conflicts and adversities are easily forgotten: [John Calvin](#), teaching, writing and preaching despite repeated attacks of the quartan fever, tuberculosis, renal colic, chest infections, gout, nephritis (one is hardly surprised that he confessed to occasional 'impatience fever'); [Richard Baxter](#), expounding Scripture, encouraging friends by supportive letters, writing books, 'a pen in God's hand' though scarcely free from pain on any day throughout his life; [John Wesley](#) and [George Whitefield](#), uplifting Christ and winning souls though both saddened by unhappy marriages; [Charles Haddon Spurgeon](#) preaching, sometimes at his best, when he was in the dark valley of depression; Tom Barnardo doing everything humanly possible for the orphan children of London whilst being cruelly slandered by a man who ought to have known better. All these people derived their inspiration from Scripture, recalled that all its great characters experienced some form of pain and recognized that following Christ involves costly living at some point or another in life. In time of intense persecution, [John Bunyan](#) reminded his contemporaries of inevitable sacrifice: the believer 'that is resolved for Heaven, if Satan cannot win him by flatteries, he will endeavour to weaken him by discouragements.' And again, 'there is no man that goeth to Heaven but he must go by the Cross; the Cross is the standing way-mark, by which all they that go to Glory must pass by.'²⁰

6. God is invincible

Leader and people, builders and soldiers, parents and children all knew that, in the face

²⁰ John Bunyan, *The Heavenly Footman*, in *Miscellaneous Works*, vol. 5, ed. Graham Midgely (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), pp. 158–159.

of evident opposition, the success of the enterprise was dependent on the God who inspired its beginning. The narrative of chapter 4, with its recurrent problems and imminent dangers, is deliberately interspersed with affirmations of faith and confidence in ‘the God of heaven’ (1:5; 2:20). The story of adversity becomes a testimony to the abundant sufficiency of God. Nehemiah renews their confidence in the Lord.

Their God, he points out, is *unique* (4, 9). He enjoys a personal relationship with his people. With buoyant confidence they address him as *our God* (4, 9). He is the God who treasures his people because he is bound to them in covenant love.

God is *attentive*. Nehemiah can turn to God in crisis and know that he will be heard (4). Moreover, it was not simply the leader who prayed, but the people as well: *But we prayed to our God* (9).

He is *righteous*. Those who deliberately maligned God’s people would find that their insults would come *back on their own heads* (4) for that was exactly what Scripture warned about those who deliberately offended God and his people.²¹

He is *powerful*. He is the *great* God (14) of the Israelite people who had repeatedly enabled them to achieve humanly impossible things because of his invincible omnipotence.

He is *holy*. Those who hurl their reproaches at God’s people are insulting the truly *awesome* God (14) to whom those people belong. He cherishes them and to hold them in contempt is to revile the God who makes them what they are.

He is *sovereign*. He not only strengthens the Israelite soldiers as they stand poised for action on Jerusalem’s walls but he also works behind the enemy lines. He frustrates the plots of Israel’s enemies (15) and reduces their vindictive plans to mere human vapourings.

He is *unfailing*. In time of extreme crisis, Nehemiah can assure his team, *Our God will fight for us* (20). He is not in the slightest doubt that the Lord he has told them to remember (14) is unchanging and dependable. He cannot disappoint or fail them.

With such confidence and commitment, Nehemiah and his colleagues continued to build despite verbal assault, psychological pressure, physical danger, natural discouragement, crippling fear and extreme danger. They were enabled to continue not because they gloried in a robust faith but because they trusted in a reliable God. It is

²¹ Ps. 94; Dt. 32:40–43; Rom. 12:19.

clear from this passage that there were times when the people's trust and heroism was frail ('strength is giving out ... we cannot rebuild') but Nehemiah's confident words reverberated throughout the entire community, *Our God will fight for us*. The leader knew that his people must work hard but, in the last analysis, the success would not depend on their sustained exertion but on God's assured strength.

When Nehemiah assured his partners, *Our God shall fight for us*, they knew that, although exertion is necessary, dependence on the Lord is rewarded.

The reader of this chapter in Nehemiah's memoirs cannot fail to be impressed by the transforming effect in society of one committed believer. God uses him not just as a resourceful leader but as salt and light²² in his community. Without the radical impact of his robust and attractive confidence in God, the enterprise which began so successfully could have ended in crippling disappointment. Seriously undermined by constant ridicule and contempt (1–3), then overwhelmed by fear (8, 14), despondency (10) and insecurity (11–12), at least some of his contemporaries abandoned work on the wall (15). God turned it all around because he used a dedicated believer who was in the right place at the right time.

Contemporary Western society lacks public figures of excellence to look up to and is in urgent need of good role models. Politicians lacking firm ethical principles and churchmen with a compromised message have little of significance to contribute to a post-Christian culture. In the modern world, novelists, dramatists and film-makers vividly depict sordid lifestyles but rarely question them. Nations bereft of spiritual and moral exemplars are in perilous danger. In our contemporary leadership vacuum, the media's passion is simply to 'reflect society' not elevate it. A former professor at the London School of Economics says, influenced by secularism, we 'have been liberated to follow our impulses' so that 'anything fixed is to be rejected as a barrier to the one grand and impossible project of building a life in which everyone enjoys the perfect satisfaction of needs.'²³ It is an unattainable goal, and those who pursue it are doomed to frustration. Personal satisfaction is a by-product which can only be obtained by embracing two greater priorities: honouring God and loving our neighbour.

²² Mt. 5:13–16.

²³ Kenneth Minogue, *The Silencing of Society* (Altrincham: The Social Affairs Unit, 1997), pp. 44, 47.

‣ Mid-fifth-century Jerusalem was privileged to have at the centre of its life a communicator with integrity and passion. He urged his contemporaries to ‘Remember the Lord who is great and awesome’ (14) and not allow subtle, alien and corrupting influences to undermine their faith and sabotage their values. In the previous century, Jerusalem had damaging leaders ‘within her like a roaring lion tearing its prey’. Religious officialdom taught ‘that there is no difference between the unclean and the clean’ so that God was ‘profaned among them’. In such moral and spiritual degeneracy God looked ‘for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land ... but I found none’.²⁴ What was missing in Ezekiel’s day was evident in Nehemiah’s. His confident faith, resilient courage, sacrificial work and consistent lifestyle turned a situation of potential breakdown into enduring testimony.

²⁴ [Ezk. 22:25–30](#); *cf.* [Ps. 106:23](#).