



The Wrath of Man Turned to the Praise of God

Read: Nehemiah 4

Many of the excellent monuments in church history have been forged in the crucible of intense conflict: the 95 theses of Martin Luther, the English Bible of William Tyndale, the Institutes of Calvin, the Standards of the Westminster Assembly, the writings of the Puritans, and more. Opposition tests a man's resolve and, if it is right, grounds and settles him more than ever on the course of glorifying God. God uses man's wrath to get Himself greater glory.

The Wrath of Man

We are introduced to the wrath of man in the first verse of this chapter. Sanballat and Tobiah first waged a war of intimidation against the Jews (vv. 1-3). They pointed their finger and laughed. The Scripture is clear, however: the well-spring of their laughter was wrath (v. 1). Inwardly, they were fuming that Jerusalem's wall was being raised up from the ground.

When this tactic failed, the enemies plotted an all-out attack (v. 7). Their laughter died down, but their wrath remained. It morphed into a conspiracy. Instead of the pointed fingers and icy scorn, we see pointed spears and whispered plots. The wrath of man is inventive! You could call it a seven-headed monster. Unless it is radically slain, it shows itself again and again.

How do God's enemies assault us? Psychological and spiritual intimidation is a serious tactic of the enemy. Perhaps one of the reasons why we don't meet with the all-out violence of the enemy is because he is quite effective intimidating us.

Translate Sanballat and Tobiah's words (vv. 1-3) into today: "Who do you think you are? With your small church, you won't amount to anything. Do you think you will be of any impact with a handful of members? A mere fox can break down what you are setting out to do."

There are parts of the world in which Sanballats go armed into church meetings and break them up. They enter Christian villages and wield a brandished sword. In some places, government leaders conspire to bring down the wall of the gospel in their societies. The Sanballatine spirit did not die with Sanballat. It will continue as long as the old serpent is still out of the bottomless pit.

What should this make us do?

The Voice of Prayer

We should pray. I love how verse 4 gives us prayer without any introduction. The words of the enemy triggered prayer from the godly. The enemies breathed out threatening against the church; the church breathed out entreaties up to heaven.

The wall-building Jews ran to their wall-coordinating Captain, the Lord. You will recall that Nehemiah had confessed that the work of building the wall was the Lord's work (Neh. 2:20). The builders were but servants of the God of heaven. If you criticize a subcontractor work, you are criticizing the general contractor for hiring the subcontractor. These builders understand this. They bring it before the Lord. They say: "*They have provoked thee to anger*" (v. 5).

When the enemies framed their plot, the builders framed their petition: *“Nevertheless we made our prayer unto our God”* (4:9). The enemies planned to storm Jerusalem; the builders stormed the throne of grace. Theirs was a sacred violence; the enemies’, an unholy violence.

Would to God that the history of our lives would have this refrain: *“Nevertheless, we made our prayer unto our God.”* Trial X came; nevertheless, we made our prayer to our God. Opposition Y arose; nevertheless, we made our prayer to God. Disappointment Z hit; nevertheless, we made our prayer to our God. Wouldn’t we be far less affected by the world if the weapon of prayer were more frequently wielded?

The Sword and Trowel

Besides praying, the builders also defended the city (vv. 13-14). Each family defended a part of the wall with swords, spears, and bows. Nevertheless, not one arrow flew; not a spear left the hand of a Jew; not a sword drew blood. The victory was won silently, without so much as a casualty. The mere fact that the builders were prepared for battle was sufficient to confound the enemy. It was like Jericho in reverse. At Jericho, the people did not lift a sword to take the city; here the people did not strike with the sword to keep the city. At Jericho, the walls tumbled without a shot; now the walls remained intact without a shot.

The Jews could have cast Tobiah’s taunt (v. 3) back at him: “Tobiah, you were wrong. Your fox-like schemes could not so much as tear down one stone from another.”

The secret behind this victory was the power of God. Nehemiah said it perfectly when he said: *“God shall fight for us”* (v. 20). How had Israel escaped the Egyptians? We are told, *“Stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will show to you today”* (Exod. 14:13). This is what the church of God needs to learn again and again: the battle belongs to the Lord. At Calvary, the church won its greatest victory without uttering one syllable against the enemy. God did it all. The wrath of man is an opportunity for God to get the glory.

The Sound of the Trumpet

Sometimes companies or people are so busy defending themselves in court that they have no time to do what they are supposed to be doing. Not so with the builders of the wall. They constructed defensively and defended constructively. *“Every one with one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other hand held a weapon”* (Neh. 5:17). God had furnished them with two hands: two things they would do. God had furnished them with two eyes: two things they would watch.

Meanwhile, the trumpet kept the people united. Because of their limited vision, the people could not always see what the enemy was planning. But the trumpet would tell the ear what the eye could not know. The portrait is of a fully engaged host. Both hands are occupied; both eyes are engaged; both ears are attentive. Every part of the body was devoted to the cause. The Christian warfare is not different; the whole man must be engaged. We cannot give our ears to the world and still do the work of the Lord. We cannot leave one hand for this world and still both build and defend.

Questions:

1. Why does the text speak of wrath (v. 1)? Do you see wrath against God’s work today?
2. The prayer of the builders might be seen as somewhat vindictive (v. 5). Is this because it is part of the Old Testament (compare Rev. 6:10)?
3. Read verse 10. Prove from the text how discouragement is understandable, undesirable, and curable.
4. How does the Christian warfare require the whole Christian? Compare Ephesians 6:13-20.
5. Is unity still important today? What are means to foster that today?

6. Notice the paradox: “Fight” (v. 14) and “Our God shall fight”: How do we reconcile these in the life of the Christian?

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