

## **Worth it**

### **Nehemiah 4 and 6**

Have you ever loved someone so much that you would do anything for them? Have you ever loved a people or a place so much, that you would put up with anything for their sake? Lots of people start by professing love like that - in wedding vows, vows of membership in a church, whispered commitments to the child in their arms, and serving communities with eyes open to the mess within them.

But the rubber hits the road when you actually do have to put up with a lot to love. When you face opposition in several ways because of the committed love you show - to Jesus, to family, to friends, to a community. Or when loving the way you committed to stretches you thin and wears you down. That's when you've got to know that what you love, is *worth* it.

That Jesus is worth it. Your spouse is worth it, and your children. This church is worth it. This community is worth it, and this city. In Nehemiah 4 and 6, Nehemiah and God's people in Jerusalem go through the mill. They're committed to loving Jerusalem by rebuilding the city walls. Loving and rebuilding to the point of completion is going to cost them. But the end result is going to be really worth it.

In both these chapters, we read about the *opposition* that Nehemiah faces to the rebuilding work, in the form of some influential and fairly powerful people - Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem. God's people are building things up, and they're seeking to knock it all down again.

God's Word here in Nehemiah 4 and 6 gives us some helpful lessons in how to respond to the various forms of opposition that Nehemiah faced. So as we see each trick the enemies try, we'll see how Nehemiah responded, and then stayed on target with the walk and the work God had given Him.

First of all, in 4:1-3, there's *opposition in the form of mockery*. Sanballat 'ridiculed the Jews in the presence of his associates...' and Tobiah joined in 'at his side.' Most of our Christian teenagers will know what that's like at school. Maybe you experienced it too. The way that power grows when people gang up to mock. Not everyone grows out of this stuff, of course. Sometimes in adulthood it just becomes more subtle, or more behind-your-back.

It's the idea that what God's people are doing is ridiculous, laughable. Believing that God has given them a call to believe and follow and build. Believing in the Lord God *at all*. If you're being mocked for your faith in Jesus or for the work for Him that God has placed in your heart, take a leaf out of Nehemiah's book.

In vv.4-5, he doesn't try to reflect the negativity back by calling names in return. Neither does he try to just take the verbal punches and suck it up. He deflects all this mockery up to God. 'God, listen to what they're saying about us! Their insults, their mocking! Don't forgive them, God. Get them back, God!'

I know, that's not what Christians are 'supposed' to pray, right? We're supposed to be nice and forgiving and get walked all over, right? Nehemiah knew what David and other Psalmists expressed in lots of their prayers - that we need to honestly express to God the bitterness, the hurt and the injustice we feel when we're mocked and despised as Christians. And God reveals this to us in His Word as a healthier way of dealing with this kind of opposition than either bottling it up or getting back at them. Report your hurt to God.

The next thing that Nehemiah's opponents try is *a direct attack*. In vv.7-8 and 11-12, we see them rallying people together to attack and destroy God's people and the rebuilding work they're setting to. In some parts of the world today, this still literally happens - I shared a story with you earlier in the year about this happening to a friend's church in Pakistan.

In our culture, it's in different ways. A fellow Church of Scotland minister in another part of the country is facing organised, rallied opposition to his work in schools and the community. Every now and then, the things God gives us to say and do will provoke that response here in Inverness, too.

Now, what's Nehemiah's response? Well, first of all, prayer. Right throughout both chapter 4 and 6, and right through the book, really, Nehemiah responds to *everything* with 'then I prayed...' This time we see it in v.9 - 'But *we* prayed to our God *and* posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.'

Prayer and proactivity. Dependence on God, together with others in prayer, then taking action to defend against the attack - we see more of that in vv.13 and 16-18. It was right to defend the gaps in the wall at Jerusalem. It was right for that church in Pakistan to contact the security forces so that their church was protected against further bombings.

People are entitled to oppose faith in Jesus or oppose the things we believe or work for, of course. But just as it was right to defend Jerusalem against violent and destructive attack, it's right to take legal and appropriate steps to defend faith in God and work for God against malicious activities.

*Which comes more naturally to you - prayer or proactivity? How could you respond to difficult situations with both?*

Nehemiah and the Jews defend the city so effectively, that their opponents abandon direct attack and try a couple of other things in chapter 6. A couple of times, *they go for a trick-and-trap approach*. In 6:1-4, the rebuilding is progressing even more - and Nehemiah's enemies four times try to lure him out - for a 'meeting.' Well, Nehemiah's not falling for that. He's not afraid to simply reply with a 'no,' as many times as he has to say it.

Again in 6:10-13, they try to set Nehemiah up, hiring a guy to say 'run away and hide in the temple so they don't kill you, Nehemiah!' Again Nehemiah wasn't falling for it; he realised they were trying to get him to do something sinful so they could discredit him. So it's another 'no!' from Nehemiah.

Opposition sometimes tries to trick-and-trap God's people. If we're to learn from Nehemiah, we'll not be naive about the overtures that those who are against Christ will make. When dealing with those we *know* have a track record in opposing us and our love and work for Jesus: Instead of defaulting to very British politeness and saying 'yes, okay' and assuming good motives in them, we're wiser to have the courage to say 'no.' If in doubt, say 'no.'

In the middle of all that, Sanballat and co try another tactic in vv.5-7 - *spreading rumours*. They threaten Nehemiah that they'll tell everyone, including the king who allowed Nehemiah to go and rebuild Jerusalem, that he's going to rebel and set up his own kingdom. Now rumours are powerful things, because people tend to believe them without much investigation. Rumours breed fear. And fear is the opposite of faith.

Nehemiah responds to the threatened rumour really simply in v.8. He just says, 'Nothing like what you are saying is happening. You're just making it up out of your own head.' He doesn't say 'no comment' (always seems to draw suspicion, that). But neither does he get drawn into a big debate trying to prove himself. He simply offers a clear denial of the lie, and gets on in faith with the work God has given him to do.

Finally, in 6:9, 13-14 and 17-19, we read the final sort of opposition to Nehemiah - *intimidation*. Everything else has been about trying to frighten and intimidate Nehemiah and the people that he leads; and that's the language that Nehemiah uses about it in these verses. In vv.17-19, the intimidation comes in a very particular form - it's about power and connections.

The leaders amongst God's people in Judah were in Tobiah's pocket. They owed him, and he owned them. There was pressure from those at the top to stop doing things the way Nehemiah knew God had told him, and to keep the authorities and the establishment happy. Not cause a fuss. Not challenge how things were. Not over-reach and be too zealous and ambitious.

Nehemiah was aware of all sorts of official correspondence approving his opponents, and he had voices in his ear saying, 'Tobiah's a good guy, let's settle down a bit, compromise and not rock the boat.'

Once again, Nehemiah's response is to pray - pray to the One who is bigger than any enemy. In v.9, in the face of the intimidation, Nehemiah prays, 'Now strengthen my hands, God.' Remember from last week, that phrase means both 'enable me' and 'keep me determined.' God, give me the tools I need, and the endurance to keep using them.

In v.14, he prays about the people trying to intimidate him - 'Remember them, God. It's enough for me to know that you've clocked what they're trying to do to stop you.'

You can sum up how Nehemiah deals with all the forms of opposition he faces like this. He says two things, simply and succinctly so he can get on with what God's given him to do. He says to God, 'Help!' And he says to his opponents, 'No!' That's it. That means he doesn't get distracted from what God has given him both to believe and to do for Him that was worth it all.

And that means, in the end, that work gets done. We read in 7:1, 'After the wall had been rebuilt...' It's as simple and abrupt as that. Suddenly, even in the face of all that, one day the work was completed.

There is another person who faced all kinds of opposition, but considered what He loved 'worth it.' A man who was mocked and insulted as he bled out on a cross, and incredibly responded with 'Father, *do* forgive them'. A man who suffered the direct attacks of torture and crucifixion, and did nothing to defend Himself.

A man whom they always tried to trick and trap in His Words, but who always turned the tables on His opponents. A man who walked in the rumours of rebellion but spoke of a different kind of Kingdom. A man whom they kept telling to 'settle down, don't rock the boat, leave the powerful alone' but who would not compromise His integrity or His mission.

This man did things more graciously and more wonderfully than Nehemiah did. So if you want to follow His example and think you can, go ahead. But this man is worthy of more than us trying to copy Him. He's worthy of us worshipping Him. The Son of God, who took all human, sinful opposition upon Himself on the cross. Because His love for us was such that He thought us 'worth it.' Right to the point of saying 'It is finished.'

*What forms of opposition have you faced in your life (or observed in the lives of others) for believing in and serving Jesus? How would learning from Nehemiah help in these situations?*

The experience of opposition was 'worth it.' And so was the experience of *weakness* that Nehemiah and the people he led went through. Sometimes I hear that as a church, we're stretched too thin. We're tired out by the things we're pursuing together, amongst many other things in our busy, busy lives.

The spirit in this church is willing - what a wonderfully united, motivated family of people we are. We *want* to rebuild the city and we *want* people to be reconciled to God. But the body - the body of Christ; the church - is feeling weak. Stretched, fragile, worn out by the work.

Well, we're very far from the only church who feel like that. And we'll find some empathy with God's people in Jerusalem rebuilding their city in Nehemiah's story in chapter 4. Let's see if some of this rings a bell.

v.6 - 'So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart.' God's people threw everything into the mission that they were called to. Much I like I see in you. And they were fully in, until they got halfway there.

Now, halfway's great. It was an astonishing accomplishment by these people actually, given the rubble that the city was surrounded by to start with. The trouble is, as we learned from chapter 1, when the mission's only half finished, it can end up getting all knocked back down again.

Halfway is not the end. But it is the point that people start fading. In v.10, we read, 'The strength of the labourers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall.' God's people are knackered, and they're discouraged by how much more there is still to do. They say they can't do it.

Then in v.12, they get frightened. 'Wherever you turn, they will attack us.' God's people are scared, because the opposition to what they're doing is closer and fiercer than they thought. They say they can't do it.

So what does Nehemiah say to them? What does God say to our church as we begin to feel weak and stretched, overwhelmed and maybe a bit afraid? It's this. Courage, people! Look at v.14. Nehemiah surveys the scene. He sees all the vulnerability and weakness too. But he stands up and says:

'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!' He reminds them of the motive they've got to press on, weak and overstretched as they are. It's the people they love who are 'worth it.' Press on and build God's Kingdom for the sake of those you love. Your family, your friends. This church, this community. *Fight* for them!

Speaking for myself, I've lived that out this week in an impossibly stretched week, where it would have been far less draining not to care about what God's given me to do and the people I'm called to make Him known to. But I'm going to keep fighting for them. And I'm going to ask you to keep going, too.

How many half built walls have come down! How many people have put their whole hearts into finding faith in Jesus until it was half built, then let it fall to ruin again! How many people have thrown everything into serving God and extending His Kingdom in some way, and jacked it in when it got inconvenient? How many people did we start fighting for, and then stop fighting for? When did we decide that the cost wasn't worth it?

There are times that we have to listen to God say 'Slow down, take some rest.' We've come across that in God's Word on our travels a few times. But it doesn't tend to come halfway through something that God wants to see us complete. When He's given us something to set about building or repairing together, we keep going when halfway through it feels like we can't.

That's the rallying cry Nehemiah gives to God's people. And we read in vv. 16-23 of just how ridiculously overstretched and thinly spread they were. If

you think serving on a Sunday rota's demanding, or leading our midweek activities as a church, you're right. But it's nothing on these guys.

Half the people working, half of them defending. Those doing the work had a tool in one hand and a weapon in the other. Everyone had to pitch in not only as a workman by day, but as a guard by night. Talk about a resourcing issue - this lot were as overstretched as they could be in this season of building what God had told them to build. But they did it, because the people and the city they loved was 'worth it'.

In the middle of describing all that activity, we read Nehemiah saying this in vv.19-20 - 'The work is extensive and spread out, and we are widely separated from each other along the wall.' Unlike the Ireland rugby team, they didn't have a strong bench of reserves to draw from. They were getting on with the work, each in their own spot, widely spread out.

Does that remind you of anything? It's what a few of us heard God saying to us about our church back at our vision day before the summer - 'You're faithfully serving me where you each are, but you're too spread out.' So what can we do about it?

In v.20, Nehemiah addresses it like this. He keeps an eye on where the priority for building is, or the place that needs defended from an attack it's facing - and he blows the trumpet there. 'Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!'

Yes, we're talking to each other more now about where God's given us the same bit of work to do and how we can do that together. But yes, we're still spread out and spread thin. But the lesson in v.20 is, when the chips are down, we can blow the trumpet. Shout for help. And the rest of us are to come running to gather round you and help you with your bit of the wall. Of course, we can't come if you don't blow the trumpet. And if your part of the mission or your faith collapse because of it, we all lose out.

*How is God calling you to trust Him? To obey Him?*

*Can you think of a way that you might need to call for help from our church to do that?*

*Is that something for now, or in the future?*

The last thing to say is this. Jesus considered you 'worth it.' Not just facing opposition both earthly and spiritual. But living in weakness, vulnerability and total dependence on God for the strength to do what God had given Him to

do. The weakness of becoming a human, and a baby at that. The weakness of living a life under constant demand in the face of need and lostness. The weakness of hanging on a cross.

All of it, because He was fighting. Fighting for that which He loved. You. That you would be rescued from sin and death, given hope and a future, an eternity and an identity in Him. You were worth anything and everything for that. Being tired. Being spread too thin. Being crucified.

Now's not the time to give up. Now's not the time to stop building the walls halfway. Now's the time to take courage, worship the God we know is strengthening our hands, cry to Him 'help!' and cry to any opponents 'no!' And to keep serving, keep building, keep going together. Because this city, and these people that we love - they're worth it.