

Sword and Trowel

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[0 : 0 0] Amen. This is God's holy word. Please keep that passage open. The way that we do it here,! We just spend our time in the text drawing out what is there and understanding together what that! means for us as Christians today and as a church. So please do keep that passage open, and let's pray that God would speak to us in that way now. Our Father, we thank you that you have breathed out your word to us. We thank you, Lord, that all of it is good for us to build us up.

And so, Father, as we stand on Jesus Christ, the cornerstone, and on the foundation of the apostles and prophets today, we pray that you would build your church, build us up together as your people, build us as living stones upon Jesus, that we might proclaim your glory and shine your light into a dark world. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, I'd be surprised if lots of us hadn't seen the pictures of Xi, Kim, and Putin together at the summit in China recently. It's quite a remarkable thing, isn't it, to see them all standing together in the same photo. What was even more remarkable, I thought, though, was what they were caught talking about? At a quiet moment in the program, Xi and Putin were standing together outside having a chat through their translators, and a mic picked up their conversation. And you could not make it up.

What were these two great men speaking about? But their desire for immortality. With enough organ transplants, our bodies will never fail. A man of 70 years old will be considered but a child. I was telling as that is, what really struck me is the terrible irony that these men who want to live forever are crushing the way to eternal life under their regimes. It's illegal to own a Bible in North Korea. The gospel is being strangled in China. Much of the church in Russia has been turned into a propaganda machine for the war. They want immortality and yet violently oppose the very thing that would grant it freely to them. Now, the evil trio that we meet in our passage this morning, saying Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arab are a kind of pound-shop version of Xi, Kim, and Putin. Not quite at the same level, either of power or delusion. However, however, this morning we see them fall into that very same sad trap of their own making. They want to be great, and yet they oppose the unstoppable work of the great and awesome God. Last time, we saw under

Nehemiah's leadership that 99.9% of God's people came together to work on the broken walls of Jerusalem, and it was a glorious sight. Young and old, rich and poor, rulers, priests, merchants, perfumers, all rolled up their sleeves to lay the bricks and carry the rubble. And as the stones were joined back together on the wall, so we saw the living stones of God's people joined together to build on the foundation of God's faithfulness and his promises. We shouldn't ever forget in Nehemiah that we're not just seeing a physical refurbishment project take place, but a spiritual restoration of God's people. But before they even got started, these three would-be tyrants stuck their heads over the wall to discourage God's people. They jeered at us and despised us and said, what is this thing that you are doing? And in our passage today, we see that rather than back down, the building up of the wall angers these men even more, and they turn up the heat. Friends, the Bible is clear that whenever

[4 : 25] God's people set themselves to God's work in their day, to the building up of his church, to the making and growing of disciples of Jesus, we will face opposition, both human and spiritual. In fact, in the next three chapters, we're going to see different forms of opposition as the enemy tries to stop and undo the work in Nehemiah's day. So what do we do then when opposition comes to the work of spiritual reformation that God has given us his church? Well, I think Nehemiah sets us a faithful and an effective example. And let's see together what it is in the text. We've got three points this morning, which track with the three times that the enemies heard that the work was carrying on in verse 1, 7, and 15. Each time we see what they do to try to stop the work, and each time how God's people therefore respond. Firstly, then, enemies mocking, pray hard, and carry on. Have a look at verse 1.

Now, when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews. Now, we might ask, you know, so what? Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me, right? But this isn't just a keyboard warrior. Verse 2, he said in the presence of his brothers and the army of Samaria, what are these feeble Jews doing? This guy's got some muscle behind him. He is a power player in the region. In fact, between them, Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem actually have Jerusalem surrounded. Samaria to the north, the Ammonites to the east, the Arabs to the south, and later on, they're joined by the Ashtodites to the west. This is an axis of evil.

So, while these guys come across, to me at least, a little bit like the hyenas out of The Lion King, right, more kind of pantomime villains than evil tyrants, they are actually dangerous. A bit like somebody who's got a few screws loose, getting their hands on the big red button on the president's desk. They are playing with fire. Because what Sanballat is saying to everyone watching on makes the great and awesome God's faithful people look like stupid idiots.

Do those few hundred ragtag, untrained nobodies think they can finish that building project? What, are they going to pray the wall up or something? Wait, don't tell me. We're going to wake up tomorrow and see a brand new shiny wall. It will never get done. And even if they do, they're just stacking these brand and crumbling stones into a pile. Call that a wall? Tobiah, who's clearly not the sharpest tool in the box, comes up with this zinger. Yes, what they're building. If a fox goes up on it, it'll break down their wall. What a burn, right? In short, they are saying to everyone around, God's people are not up to it. Don't take them seriously. They'll soon be gone.

Now, I would guess that those of us who are Christians here will have been made to feel like that at one point or another. When I was studying at seminary, Susie told one of her colleagues at work that I was training to be a minister. Her reply was, I didn't know people still did that.

[8 : 24] Brackets. Isn't the church just a time capsule that we're going to bury in history and one day we'll dig up and remember what we as a civilization used to think because we're done with all of that now? Why bother training for that? A lot of the soundbite takedowns you come across on YouTube or TikTok are of the same basic quality as Tobias one-liner. It's not clever, it's not sharp, but it can still get under our skin, can't it? When we're made to feel, in the words of one former archbishop, a bit thick for believing the Bible or being part of a church. As we together set out to plant a new church, no doubt people will hear about it and ask, what do they think they're doing? Churches are closing left, right, and center. If you wanted to build us a new restaurant or a cinema or a nightclub, why not just do that? Because you know that this is going to be shut in 10 years, don't you, and turned into something else. Can you hear it, brothers and sisters, the voice of San Balat and Co. echoing down through the ages? What are these feeble Christians doing? Do these few hundred nobodies think that they are going to resurrect Christianity in the northeast of Scotland? What are they going to preach and pray churches into existence? Do they honestly think they'll wake up one day and find a healthy gospel church in every community in Scotland? You cannot be serious about building up God's kingdom out of these crumbled ruins. Jesus is clear that the world is not going to cheer when his people get to work on building up his church in our day. If we're serious about spiritual reformation, then get ready to hear

San Balat's scorn pouring down on you, on us. So what do we do when enemies mock? Well, Nehemiah does two things. He prays hard, and he carries on. His prayer in verse 4 and 5 is very hard indeed.

Maybe we even thought, as we heard it, harsh. He's essentially asking God to do to their enemies what he'd done to his own people when they provoked him to anger, being plundered in the land by their captives. He's describing the exile that they've just come back out of. And remember that Nehemiah has humbly confessed in chapter 1 that their exile was deserved. He prayed, paraphrasing, Lord, you said that if we continue to sin and not turn back, that this is what you'd do to us. You'd send us away. And you did that because you are holy and righteous. But you also say that if we turn back to you, you are gracious and merciful and will bring us back. And that is what you've done as well.

So it's helpful to remember that he's not praying anything on his enemies, that he would complain about himself in their position. He's saying, Lord, if you were willing to do that to us for our sin, well, won't you do it to these guys who are doing the same to you now?

Wouldn't that be fair? He's also praying that and not doing it himself. And there is a difference when Paul tells the church in Rome not to take vengeance on people. That's not because God would never do such a thing. Rather, vengeance is mine, says the Lord. I will repay.

[12 : 22] Friends, let's not pretend that God's enemies aren't playing with fire. Nehemiah's prayer reminds us that when people make light of God and mock his people, God takes that very seriously indeed.

So should we pray prayers like this? Well, I don't think we should be quick to reach for such specific prayers in our everyday battles.

Remember that Sambalat and Co. are not that one difficult person at school or on your street who makes life hard for you for being a Christian. These guys are the Kims and Gs and Putins of the world who use military might to shut down churches and turn nations against his people and God.

But we do want to pray hard whenever we are looked down upon for living as a Christian and being part of our church. That the Lord would please do what is right in our situation, even though we might not know as clearly quite what that is.

And we want to remind ourselves in prayer that he is not neutral or disinterested, but said, I will build my church. And therefore that he is against those who look down upon it.

[13 : 38] The gates of hell will not prevail against it. And we want to find strength in prayer to carry on regardless of what people say. Nehemiah prayed, and so in verse 6 he said, we built the wall.

And the wall was joined together to half its height for the people had a mind to work. Brothers and sisters, our response to human mockery is to pray hard and carry on.

Or we might say, work hard, pray hard. And it's a joined up strategy, isn't it? Like the wall now, it's connected up. Work and prayer together.

We are on our knees in prayer and at work. I wonder, brothers and sisters, do you have a mind to work today?

Or could one of the reasons, if we don't have a mind to work, be the embarrassment that we fear of having our names associated with the work of the gospel or with what that church is doing?

[14 : 43] Let's instead pray that God's will would be seen to be done as we commit ourselves wholeheartedly to his work and that he would handle the opposition in whatever way he chooses in his great sovereignty as we crack on.

Pray hard and carry on. But it's not just mocking, is it? Next we see God's enemies come knocking. Here's our second point. Enemies knocking. What do we do?

Pray again and protect the work. Have a look at verse 7. But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Astrodites heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and that the breaches were beginning to be closed, they were very angry.

And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and cause confusion in it. So when the enemies hear that God's people haven't been put off by their awful jokes, they turn up the heat.

Remember, they've got Jerusalem surrounded, so their plan is to close in and cut off the city between them. Clearly that is much more serious than the bad-mouthing that they have been doing.

[15 : 59] It's worth saying, I think, that persecution does get worse. Sometimes we as Christians in this country can speak about an experience of persecution here.

Certainly we do face social pressure to conform and can wrongly be put off the work that God's given us to do. But we shouldn't talk, I think, as if there is an equivalence between what we experience here and what God's people go through in countries like Iran or China.

Clearly it is much more serious to have the full military might of the state come against you than to experience embarrassment and social pressure.

We don't have to pretend that it's worse than it is. But we should, I think, be prepared for the fact that it can get worse than this.

So what if it does? What if serious opposition comes knocking? Well, Nehemiah's response reflects the seriousness of the threat, verse 9. We prayed to our God and said a guard is a protection against them day and night.

[17 : 12] Notice prayer again. More prayer. Interesting, isn't it? That is the weapon Nehemiah reaches for every time. It's not that prayer was okay when it was just a war of words, but this time prayer won't cut it.

No, it's prayer when the threat level is low, medium, and high. Prayer, the first resort, not the last. I wonder if you ever ask yourself, what can be done for our brothers and sisters in a place like North Korea?

It feels so helpless. And it's a great thing to partner with organizations like Open Doors, as we do, who go and support them over there. But do you know what all of us can do at any time of day?

Pray. We can reach for prayer, can't we? That's not a cop-out. It's the first thing we should do in the face of knocking enemies.

But that's not all. What else? We pray to our God and set a guard to protect the work. They pray and protect. Again, see that prayer and action together.

[18 : 21] It's joined up thinking. But will that strategy hold? See, the physical threat is only half the battle here because we find there is also a psychological element to the war as well.

And we all know what it's like, don't we, when there's things just going around and we're not quite sure who first said it, but there's just stuff in the air. Well, in Judah, which is the whole region around Jerusalem, there was a meme going around or a sort of rhyme that people would say, which one commentator captures like this.

The builders are finished. The rubbish piles up. We're in over our heads. We're about to give up. See how the people have internalized the voices of their enemies.

Now they're telling themselves that by ourselves we won't finish the work. So the opposition has gotten under God's people's skin. It's beginning to sap what little energy they have left.

Which mixed with the other thing that's going around in verse 11, there doesn't seem like much point carrying on. Our enemies said, they will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work.

[19 : 45] Be worked to death or killed in my sleep. Not great options. Would we carry on the work if those were the stakes?

Which is where the entire population's thoughts turn. In verse 12, at that time the Jews who lived near them came from all directions and said to us ten times, you must return to us.

Come home. Stop this nonsense. Come off the wall. Imagine that there was going to be a protest outside the church one Sunday morning.

Imagine we knew about that. Imagine the anxious conversations that would be happening. The elders in boxes would be filling up, wouldn't they, with emails that say, we cannot go ahead with the services on Sunday.

You would be out of your mind to put us through that. Who are you going to tell to cross a picket line to come to church? That's what's happening here.

[20 : 47] You're out of your mind, Nehemiah. If you think it's worth putting our lives in danger to keep building this wall, it's totally irresponsible. Andy Gemmell gave some wonderful talks on the book of James at Keswick this year.

I know some of you were there, that you enjoyed them. One of the things that he pointed out in the situation in James is something that can happen in churches when pressure comes from the outside, divisions can open up on the inside.

And that's because of our sinful instinct for self-preservation. It turns us in on ourselves and away from others. We begin to guard our own interests and just lose sight of the interests of others or the big picture.

And we can see that happening here, can't we? The enemies turn up the pressure and what happens to God's people? What bubbles up? Panic and anxiety, grumbling and complaining, defeatism, they all start coming out.

And in a sense, Sambalat and Coe's plan is already working. They haven't even had to kill anyone to send God's people into panic and confusion and ultimately, their great goal, break their resolve to do the whack.

[22 : 08] So what is Nehemiah going to do? Well, he digs deep and sticks to the plan. Verse 13, in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall in open places, so that's where the wall is least, it's kind of lowest and they're most open to attack, I stationed the people by their clans with swords, spears, and bows.

And I looked and arose and said to the nobles and the officials and the rest of the people, do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord who is great and awesome and fight for your brothers, sons, daughters, wives and homes.

This is Elizabeth I at Tilbury. This is Theoden on the plains of Minas Tirith. Nehemiah puts a weapon in the hand of every one of God's people, stands before them and exhorted them to remember the great and awesome Lord, to pray and to hold their ground and protect the work.

Friends, when is the right time to give up on God's work? Never. Right? Where do we draw the line? We don't. What if we're not up to it?

What if the opposition is too strong? What if it's not safe? Nehemiah tells us what? Remember the Lord who is great and awesome.

[23 : 38] I wonder in our hearts, are we repeating that rhyme to ourselves? Have we taken on our opponent's delusion that they are just coming against little old us?

Brothers and sisters, we know something. we know something, that the world in its ignorance and foolishness doesn't realize, that when they come against the church, they are putting themselves against the God of heaven, the great and awesome Lord who fights for us.

We know, don't we? Don't we know this? That there is nowhere safer than under his protection? that there is no work more worthwhile than the work that he has given us to do?

Because there is no future more certain than the one that he has promised. If remembering our great and awesome, risen and reigning Lord Jesus isn't enough for us to hold our ground and keep building when the opposition comes, nothing will be.

So we pray to him and we protect the work. What does that mean? Well, I think first and foremost, it means protecting each other, as Nehemiah says.

[24 : 53] Interesting, isn't it, that he's not mainly interested in protecting the wall. He is interested in the wall protecting the people. We're to look out for each other.

Resist that sinful urge to look out for number one and close in on ourselves. What keeps me safe? And instead, put each other and the whole church family first.

We're to treasure and cherish those bonds of love and unity that he's building among us as we work shoulder to shoulder and not cheaply cast them off when we feel a bit threatened or exposed or vulnerable.

They say the thing that sets the best armies apart in the world is when each soldier knows that the soldier next to him would die for him. When each soldier is fighting not for their own survival but for the survival of those either side and they learn to therefore trust each other and that confidence frees them individually from the fear of death and they have the boldness to push on and succeed in the mission.

And friends, that goes for church too, doesn't it? When does the church hold firm and stand together? If you're not looking out for the people around you, we're all weaker.

[26 : 16] If you're not laying down your life for others, we are wide open. If you're only looking out for yourself, we'll collectively break under pressure. We'll panic.

We'll grumble. We'll leave because we'll put our safety and security first instead of guarding and protecting God's work among us which today as then is first and foremost in the hearts of people and our relationships together in us, in the people sitting around you, in the body of Christ.

So don't ask when opposition comes what's best for me but rather what is best for us. When enemies come knocking, we pray to the great and awesome Lord and protect the work.

So we've had enemies mocking, enemies knocking. Finally, and more briefly, enemies restocking. Don't let your guard drop.

Don't let the work stop. Have a look at verse 15. When our enemies heard that it was known to us and God had frustrated their plan, we all returned to the wall, each to his work.

[27 : 30] So the threat diffuses for now, Sambalat and co have lost the element of surprise because God's people were prepared for opposition to come and stood united behind the work.

And so the enemies begin to back down. We know they're only restocking because they'll be back for more in chapter 6. But what happens now is very instructive because even though the opposition has died down, God's people neither lay down their tools nor their weapons.

See that powerful image in verse 17. Each labored on the work with one hand and held his weapon in the other. The title of this sermon was borrowed from the title of a magazine started by the 19th century pastor C.H. Spurgeon which in turn was borrowed from this passage.

And I think it says something really powerful about the Christian life. That we can't let our guard drop nor can we let the work stop. And that if we belong to the church on earth which if you're a Christian you do.

We don't get to choose. If we let our guard drop and drop our weapon we leave ourselves unprepared for the spiritual attack which will come. And if we let the work stop and drop our tools then the enemy has already won because that is his goal.

[29 : 00] We read at the start of the service from Ephesians Paul's words to the church. Put on the whole armor of God. Why? So that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.

Brothers and sisters you might not feel the heat today. Okay? You might not have people in your life who make who are actively making your life as a Christian difficult.

Praise God that I'm not aware that we as a congregation have actual human enemies standing against us and opposing the work today. Thank God for that. But let's not forget there's a war on.

Because says Paul our fight is not against flesh and blood. It's not against something we can see and feel and hear. It's against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

I wonder have we let our guard down this morning? Are we battle ready? Or are we being caught out by the devil's schemes?

[30 : 03] How do we put on God's armor and stand firm? Well Paul says wouldn't Nehemiah love this? Praying at all times in the spirit with all prayer and supplication.

He would love that wouldn't he? Get ready pick up tools and pray. So a sword in one hand and a trowel in the other. There was a missionary a bit before Spurgeon called William Carey who was famous for having said this expect great things from God do great things for God.

Expect great things from God do great things for God. Nehemiah expected great things from God didn't he? Verse 20 our God will fight for us and therefore he and all God's people did great things for God.

Verse 21 so we labored at the work. And what these guys do is far beyond what most or even all of us as Christians would be called to do in Christ's service today from dawn till dusk they build the wall and then they take turns at the watch overnight and then back to work again in the morning round and round they go.

Verse 23 says Nehemiah his brothers servants and guards and none of us didn't even change their clothes. I hope that's not us. But I wonder friends how great is our ambition in the Lord not for personal gain but zeal for his glory and kingdom and church.

[31 : 42] Are you doing great things tiring bold or risky things for the Lord? What does our Christian service say about what we expect from him?

Do we expect little and therefore do little or do we expect much and therefore do much for him? If you've laid down your weapon or your tool this morning or both this is a call Christian soldiers Christian builders to take them both back up again.

Don't let your guard drop and don't let the work stop. Friends our Lord Jesus Christ is great and awesome remember him that he fights for us and let us therefore be prayerful stay on guard and keep building up his body whatever trouble or persecution may come for his glory on earth.

Let's pray that we would. Let's pray. Let's pray. Lord Jesus how we thank you that you said on earth I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

Lord it is on that promise and because you are great and awesome that we can have any strength or confidence to say that we will join the work.

[33 : 17] Lord we pray that you would help us not to forget you never to think that we go in our own strength but Lord we pray that you would help us to remember who we build upon and who fights for us.

Father we are so conscious that your church across the world faces such hostility. We pray for brothers and sisters now for whom the violence is real and the threat is real and Lord how we pray that you would root and ground them deeply in Jesus and that even today on this your Lord's day you would meet with them in a precious way and bear them up and Lord we pray that you would help us to be prepared that that may come upon us.

Lord help us we pray to be on guard against the schemes of the devil be they obvious or be they subtle guard us we pray protect us we ask and gird us up for your work we ask in Jesus name Amen.