

# Imprecatory Prayers, Bullying, and Obstacles: Nehemiah 4

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Sunday, June 11, 2023  
Covenant Church  
Pastor Zack Phillips

## Nehemiah 4

**<sup>1</sup> Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he mocked the Jews. <sup>2</sup> He said in the presence of his associates and of the army of Samaria, "What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore things? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish it in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish—and burned ones at that?" <sup>3</sup> Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, "That stone wall they are building—any fox going up on it would break it down!" <sup>4</sup> Hear, O our God, for we are despised; turn their taunt back on their own heads, and give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. <sup>5</sup> Do not cover their guilt, and do not let their sin be blotted out from your sight; for they have hurled insults in the face of the builders.**

**<sup>6</sup> So we rebuilt the wall, and all the wall was joined together to half its height; for the people had a mind to work.**

**<sup>7</sup> But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and the gaps were beginning to be closed, they were very angry, <sup>8</sup> and all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it. <sup>9</sup> So we prayed to our God, and set a guard as a protection against them day and night.**

**<sup>10</sup> But Judah said, "The strength of the burden bearers is failing, and there is too much rubbish so that we are unable to work on the wall." <sup>11</sup> And our enemies said, "They will not know or see anything before we come upon them and kill them and stop the work." <sup>12</sup> When the Jews who lived near them came, they said to us ten times, "From all the places where they live they will come up against us." <sup>13</sup> So in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, in open places, I stationed the people according to their families, with their swords, their spears, and their bows. <sup>14</sup> After I looked these things over, I stood up 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 kin, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes."**

**<sup>15</sup> When our enemies heard that their plot was known to us, and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to his work. <sup>16</sup> From that day on, half of my servants worked on construction, and half held the spears, shields, bows, and body-armor; and the leaders posted themselves behind the whole house of Judah, <sup>17</sup> who were building the wall. The burden bearers carried their loads in such a way that each labored on the work with one hand and with the other held a weapon. <sup>18</sup> And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built. The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me. <sup>19</sup> And I said to the nobles, the officials, and the rest of the people, "The work is great and widely spread out, and we are separated far from one another on the wall. <sup>20</sup> Rally to us wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet. Our God will fight for us."**

<sup>21</sup> So we labored at the work, and half of them held the spears from break of dawn until the stars came out. <sup>22</sup> I also said to the people at that time, "Let every man and his servant pass the night inside Jerusalem, so that they may be a guard for us by night and may labor by day."  
<sup>23</sup> So neither I nor my brothers nor my servants nor the men of the guard who followed me ever took off our clothes; each kept his weapon in his right hand.

## A. Imprecatory Prayer

### Psalm 69:22–28

- <sup>22</sup> Let their table be a trap for them,  
a snare for their allies.
- <sup>23</sup> Let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see,  
and make their loins tremble continually.
- <sup>24</sup> Pour out your indignation upon them,  
and let your burning anger overtake them.
- <sup>25</sup> May their camp be a desolation;  
let no one live in their tents.
- <sup>26</sup> For they persecute those whom you have struck down,  
and those whom you have wounded, they attack still more.
- <sup>27</sup> Add guilt to their guilt;  
may they have no acquittal from you.
- <sup>28</sup> Let them be blotted out of the book of the living;  
let them not be enrolled among the righteous.

### Psalm 137:7-9

- <sup>7</sup> Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites  
the day of Jerusalem's fall,  
how they said, "Tear it down! Tear it down!  
Down to its foundations!"
- <sup>8</sup> O daughter Babylon, you devastator!  
Happy shall they be who pay you back  
what you have done to us!
- <sup>9</sup> Happy shall they be who take your little ones  
and dash them against the rock!

...(T)he absence of anger, especially that sort of anger which we call indignation, can, in my opinion, be a most alarming symptom. —C. S. Lewis<sup>1</sup>

The rhetoric of Psalm 137 is unrestrained, reckless, and shameless. We might wish it were not there—in the Psalms or in the Bible. We might wish there were not such resentment among displaced peoples. We might wish there were not such outcomes from massive

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<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*.

military action by the superpowers that eventuate in such impossible costly ways. We might wish all of that. But the psalmist knows better—as do we! We know better in part precisely because these verses are there. And because there are such resentments. And because there are such devastations by superpowers. And it must be brought to speech! —Walter Brueggemann<sup>2</sup>

**John 2:23-25** <sup>23</sup> When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. <sup>24</sup> But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people <sup>25</sup> and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone.

## B. Bullying

### **Psalm 109:22-25**

<sup>22</sup> For I am poor and needy,  
and my heart is pierced within me.  
<sup>23</sup> I am gone like a shadow at evening;  
I am shaken off like a locust.  
<sup>24</sup> My knees are weak through fasting;  
my body has become gaunt.  
<sup>25</sup> I am an object of scorn to my accusers;  
when they see me, they shake their heads.

### **Psalm 80:4-6**

<sup>4</sup> O LORD God of hosts,  
how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?  
<sup>5</sup> You have fed them with the bread of tears,  
and given them tears to drink in full measure.  
<sup>6</sup> You make us the scorn of our neighbors;  
our enemies laugh among themselves.

See also, e.g., Psalm 22:6-7; 31:10-11; 35:13-16; 44:13-16; 69:9-11; 79:4;

## C. Obstacles

William Booth (1829-1912) and Catherine Booth (1829-90)

Roy Hattersley, *Blood and Fire: The Story of William and Catherine Booth and Their Salvation Army*

“A sort of joy exists that knows nothing at all of the heart's pain, anguish, and dread; it does not last; it can only numb a person for the moment. [But] the joy of God has gone through the poverty of the manger and the agony of the cross; that is why it is invincible, irrefutable.

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *From Whom No Secrets Are Hid: Introducing the Psalms*.

It does not deny the anguish, when it is there, but finds God in the midst of it, in fact precisely there;...it looks death straight in the eye, but it finds life precisely within it.”<sup>3</sup>

**Rom 5:3-5** <sup>3</sup> And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, <sup>4</sup> and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, <sup>5</sup> and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

*Question: What is one thing that God may have said to you through this sermon?*

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<sup>3</sup> *Conspiracy and Imprisonment: 1940–1945*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 16, trans. Lisa F. Dahill and Mark S. Bocker, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 377-78.