

WAR OF WORDS

NEHEMIAH 4:1-6 | Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews. ² And he said in the presence of his brothers and of the army of Samaria, "What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore it for themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish up in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, and burned ones at that?" ³ Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, "Yes, what they are building—if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall!" ⁴ Hear, O our God, for we are despised. Turn back their taunt on their own heads and give them up to be plundered in a land where they are captives. ⁵ Do not cover their guilt, and let not their sin be blotted out from your sight, for they have provoked you to anger in the presence of the builders. ⁶ So we built the wall. And all the wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work.



ur weapons are not carnal. And neither are Satan's. Words are among his most lethal

weapons. With words he seduced Adam and Eve into pride. With words he tried to derail Jesus from his destiny. And with words, he tries to deter Nehemiah from his mission.

Fire one: Sanballat launches a volley of jibes to demoralise the builders (:1-2, 5). Fire two: Tobiah quips that the wall would fall under the foot of a fox (:3). There's just enough truth in these taunts to discourage the builders—if they listen. The Jews really are feeble. They are surrounded by enemies. They have no army or allies. And as for the wall, they have no time for perfection. They must build in great haste and with recycled stones before Sanballat can organise an attack or send letters of accusation to the king (EZRA 4).

Sanballat and Tobiah know what they are doing and Satan is behind it. When people mock us and make us look stupid in public, our morale is challenged at the deepest level (JL PACKER). No one is immune, not even Nehemiah. But he fights back with

heavy artillery. Fire one: prayer. Fire two: work. As usual, prayer is his first resort: *Hear, O our God, for we are despised* (:4). And as always, he matches prayer with work.

What can we learn from Nehemiah's 'cursing' prayers in verses 4 and 5? Both Jesus and Paul require us to bless our enemies, not curse them (LK 6:27-28; ROM 12:14-21). We know that Christ will triumph over all evil and vindicate us in the end, if not before. This, however, is no excuse for permissive tolerance of blatant evil and injustice on our watch. There are at least four things in Nehemiah's prayer that we can and should imitate:

One, the plea for God's intervention and the vindication of his name. Two, an uncompromising zeal for God's honour (PS 69:9; JOHN 2:17). Three, the will to fight against evil with the weapons God puts in our hands. And four, the unwavering obedience to God's mission against all odds and in defiance of all opposition. *So we built the wall. ...for the people had a mind to work* (4:6).

WALL OF DUTY

This pandemic is more than a wake-up call. It is possibly an inflection point in salvation history (BISHOP RENNIS PONNIAH).

■ Be vigilant. Pray for bishops, pastors and elders. As they obey God to remake the church for a different future, the enemy will bombard them with psychological weapons to wreck their confidence, scorn their passion, mock their enthusiasm, confuse their minds, demoralise their teams, and reduce everyone to a zombie state of indecision, inaction, and inertia—all this to thwart their mission! Stand in the gap. Ask God to grant our leaders sharp discernment to detect, intercept, and destroy every missile from hell. Ask God to protect our leaders from the fiery darts of self-doubt, insecurity, and the fear of failure.

■ Be battle-ready. Pray for pastors and leaders who are helming ministries on the frontlines of the public morality war. Do not underestimate the scale of spiritual warfare in these end times. Pray: O Lord, let all name-calling, accusations of bigotry and hate speech,

ridicule and mockery serve only to energise them. Draw them nearer to you. Draw them closer to each other. Strengthen their resolve to push harder for what true love is.

■ Be God-centred. Pray for the Church. In all that we are about, may we be motivated by a pure zeal for God's name, God's honour, and God's house. Nothing less! On our watch, pray that we, as guardians and gatekeepers, will have zero tolerance for falsehood, corruption, injustice, and blatant evil in Church and Society. May we come to terms with our human lack. May we be driven to our knees over and over again by the overwhelming conviction that our own experience and wisdom are inadequate for the challenges of today and the insanities of tomorrow.

■ Be balanced. Ask God for a will to pray and a mind to work. *Prayer and action can never be seen as contradictory or mutually exclusive. Prayer without action grows into powerless pietism, and action without prayer degenerates into questionable manipulation. If prayer leads us into deeper unity with the compassionate Christ, it will always give rise to concrete acts of service* (HENRI NOUWEN). Seek God diligently. Serve God passionately.

■ Be focused. Pray for the Church to be God's fiery house of prayer. Purpose-driven. Prophetic. Christ-centred. Word-based. Spirit-led. This is the will of God. But we are too often distracted. We lack the will to dive deep and the mind to probe the real issues confronting us. As a result, our prayers can become pointless and powerless. We plead, but without desperation. We petition, but sometimes our prayers are mini-sermons in disguise. Ponder deeply. Repent earnestly. Ask the Holy Spirit who is a Spirit of intercession to help us in our weakness—praying in us and through us according to the mind and will of God (ROM 8:26-27).