

Series: Transforming the World in which God has Placed Us

VBC

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Nehemiah 4:1-6

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“When Hell Breaks Loose”

Hidden beyond the layers of our comfort and entertainment is the reality that many suffer for their faith in this world

- It is now being reported that more followers of Christ have been murdered for their faith in the last century than in all of church history combined

The question is “WHAT WOULD GOD HAVE US DO?”

- How should the body of Christ respond?
- What we were challenged with already on this day of remembering the persecuted church, is underscored in this fourth chapter of Nehemiah

God’s will is being established

- After a long winter of judgment, grace is breaking out
- God’s people are being formed into community again
- The wall is being rebuilt, shame is being removed, and dignity is re-established
 - HOPE RESTORED
- The enemy is preparing to attack (read Nehemiah 4:1-6)

As long as we live in this fallen world:

- Darkness will contend with the light, evil will confront that which has the fingerprints of God
- Evil men will resist any efforts to fulfill God’s call, God’s will

In Nehemiah 4:1, we find them:

- In a snit, in a rage
- Incensed: literally *harah* meaning “hot”, “vexed”

All this over a wall?

- It’s much more than bricks and mortar
- It is a front to their self interests
- It is a movement of God
- The coming together of His people
- And so they raged
- It’s not that these men suddenly emerged
 - They were there from the beginning (2:10, 19)

- But now their fury spills over
 - So they attacked with words
 - Words meant to demoralize
 - Create distress in the soul
 - Kill the will
 - We are familiar with such words
 - Words that jeer, mock, laugh
 - Pour out shame
 - Keep people paralyzed where they are
 - Words that love to dominate

THIS IS WHAT SHAME DOES

1) IT RIDICULES ONE'S ABILITIES

- Sanballat mocked those on the wall for overestimating their abilities (verse 2)
 - "What are these feeble, withered, LAME Jews doing?"
 - "Will they restore it by themselves, as if they are capable of fixing anything?"

2) SHAME ALSO RIDICULES ONE'S FAITH

- "Will they bring sacrifices to a God who long since abandoned them?" (verse 2)
 - "Do they think He is interested anymore?"
- Their intent was to keep them in their state of judgment, of unforgiveness
- "Do their prayers will build this wall?"

3) SHAME RIDICULES ONE'S DREAMS

- Can they finish in a day, or even in their lifetime? (verse 2)
 - Between the lines: "Have these idiots any idea the task they have taken on?"
 - "Can they build with materials that have lost their integrity, which fire has corrupted?"
 - "Anyone knows limestone, softened by fire, loses its durability."
 - Added to the shame was the sarcasm of Tobiah "Even the lightness of a fox will create its own breaches" (verse 3)
 - In our vernacular, "This wall is nothing more than crap."

We have some acquaintance with these words of shame

- All of us have experienced them in one form or another, be it by unaccepting parents, graceless peers
 - Contempt for being small, for having sung a bad solo, preached a terrible sermon
 - Ashamed for being illegitimate, or dumped by another, duped by a con artist, humiliated by a teacher, ridiculed for our strange habit, for following the Padres

- And then there is the contempt for following Jesus
 - What would God have us do?
 - Consider Nehemiah's response
 - Rather than capitulate in the face of evil, wilt under their withering shame, the text tells us this man with a holy discontent and a holy prayer and a holy nerve and a holy conviction and a holy imagination, became a man with also this - A HOLY INDIGNATION
- This is also required to build walls

And this is what people with holy indignation must do

1) WE MUST PRAY AGAINST THE EVIL (verses 4-5)

- In the midst of their ridicule, Nehemiah stood his ground
 - Not by lashing out at them, but by pouring out his soul to God
 - He realized that justice is God's work
 - Prayer is our work
 - But note the kind of prayers we are called to pray (verses 4b-5)
 - Nehemiah's words are passionate, white hot
 - A) Turn back their contempt on their own heads, let them feel the shame, experience the shackles of prejudice and contempt and derision
 - B) Let them experience what it is to be plundered in a land of captivity, give them a taste of their evil (verse 4c)

Illustration: in Beirut, there are Palestinians and others with no rights, no citizenship, no wealth, no hope

Nehemiah's prayer – "Let them feel such despair!"

- C) Do not conceal, cover, blot out the guilt of their sin (verse 5)
 - Don't allow them to dwell in eternity apart from their sins
- There is no constraint in his condemnation
- He was not about to allow them one more opportunity to shame the people of God

- Here is a man crying for justice
- A prayer heard often in God's word
- Especially in the Psalms
 - May those who seek my life be disgraced, may their path be dark and slippery (Psalm 35)
 - Break their teeth, let them be like a slug melting away as it moves, consume them till they are no more (Psalm 58)
 - May they never be listed with the righteous (Psalm 69)
 - May their children be fatherless, wandering beggars
 - May the sin of their mothers never be blotted out, may their sins always remain (Psalm 109)

Illustration: We understand such emotions; we mutter imprecatory prayers under our breath often

- When cut off in traffic, may an overpass collapse on their cars
 - When we get a bad call on the tennis court, may they become prematurely blind
- We read such prayers and wonder, "Is there justification for such praying?"
 - Is there a place for holy indignation in the body of Christ
 - We ask such questions, knowing that we are a community of grace
 - We may also ask because we have been treated nicely for so long we've forgotten that we are in enemy territory
 - In September of 1922, a white mob had raged through Atlanta murdering two dozen blacks, and afterwards, the African-American reformer, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote: "Doth not this justice of hell stink in Your nostrils, O God? How long shall the mounting flood of innocent blood roar in Thine ears and pound in our hearts for vengeance...KEEP NOT THOU SILENT O GOD!"
 - Here was a man who stared at evil
 - And in him rose a holy indignation
 - For to do anything less is to raise the question if we take sin seriously
 - "It is to wonder if our souls are really unawakened" (CS Lewis)

But something else must characterize our holy indignation

- For between our day and Nehemiah's, stands the cross
- We have a Redeemer, who calls us to a ministry of reconciliation, hence...

2) WE MUST PRAY IN LIGHT OF GRACE

- Simply because we are called to do nothing short of this
 - To pray for those who persecute us, to love our enemies to bless and not curse (Matthew 5:44, Romans 12:14)
- Which can be painfully hard

Illustration: Christians in East Beirut to pray for Muslims in West Beirut

- For believers in southern Nigeria to pray for those in Abuja, and beyond, who have torched their churches

Yet, this does not mean the a prayer like Nehemiah's has no place

- Paul cursed the Judaizers; Jesus delivered His woes
- Long suffering prayers of grace also mix with prayers filled with indignation
 - Where there is hardened, violent, gross oppression
- Prayers for the oppressed must also be joined by prayers against the oppressor

The question is, "Will we?"

- Or will we allow the unimaginable and unbelievable to become routine?
- While many are murdered and martyred, will we pass by the other side of the road?