

Opposition – The first taste of being an exile.
Nehemiah 4:1-5:19
(Expanded Sermon Notes)



Conflict is nothing new, and we live in a cultural moment that seems to thrive off of conflict in every form (intellectual, interpersonal, physical, religious, etc.). So we should not be surprised when conflict shows up at our front door and sits down on our couch. Nehemiah wasn't surprised. Instead, he readied himself for what was ahead. The reality is that they were exiles in their own homeland, and their values were abnormal, to say the least. Peter tells us that we are foreigners in this world (1 Pet. 2:11). Peter also tells us that we are not to surrender to those desires or values of the world. The interesting thing here is that not only did they face conflict from the outside, but they faced it from the inside as well. Being exiles had impacted them, and it took great effort to contend with the external and internal forces that wanted to tear them apart. But, that is life being a spiritual exile. You'll never quite fit in. However, that doesn't mean that there is no hope, it means that we long for something better. Simply, **exiles look forward to something better.**

1. Conflict – Internal and External

a. Those externally opposed – Sword and trowel.

i. To begin this larger section, we are reintroduced to a group of outside opposition.

1. V.1 – **Sanballat**... jeers and mocks ... **sticks, stones, and words can hurt.**

a. To open the attack with a barrage of words was worth trying. It is the enemy's oldest weapon, and in the form of ridicule, it needs no factual ammunition; not even argument. The words stung; but they produced not a quiver of indecision: only indignation.¹

b. To look at Sanballat's questions (2) in more detail: on the rare Hebrew word for *restore*, see on 3:8. The point of *Will they sacrifice?* is probably: Are these fanatics going to *pray* the wall up? It's their only hope! *Will they finish up in a day?* i.e. have they any idea of what they are taking on? And the final question simply exaggerates the destruction, for there was plenty of usable stone.²

2. V. 3 – **Tobiah** joins in on the mocking by stating that their rebuilding was so weak a fox could bring it down.

¹ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 98.

² Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 98.

3. Vv.7-8 – We are now introduced to a new group – The Ammonites and the **Ashdodites** → This adds a new group from the introduction to the opposition in chap. 3.
 - a. *The Ashdodites*, now joins the alliance of the north (Sanballat of Samaria), the east (Tobiah and the Ammonites) and the south (the Arabs), to bring a threat from the west as well.
 - b. How much of this was mere saber-rattling it is hard to be sure (see further on verses 11f.). **The failure of this impressive group to strike a single blow suggests that ‘the king’s letters’ (2:9) gave them pause.** But their plotting, however half-hearted, clearly included potential raids and harassments (8), and had to be taken seriously.³
 - c. The reality is that Nehemiah and those working on the walls were literally surrounded by enemies to the north, south, east, and west.
 - d. **Rewind** – (cf. Isa. 7) Ahaz was king of Judah (the southern kingdom) during the prophet Isaiah’s life. He was surrounded by enemies, and God promised to deliver him.
 - i. Ahaz refused the Lord’s help and instead trusted his own instincts. Ultimately, those instincts would bring the downfall of his kingdom years later.
- ii. **How does Nehemiah respond to these external threats?**⁴
 1. **Mocking and ridicule** – He prays and keeps working. (cf. 4:1-6)
 - a. **The celebrated remark, *we prayed ... and set a guard*, exactly reflects the faith of Nehemiah.** The partnership of heaven and earth, of trust and good management, is taken for granted as something normal.
 - b. There will be another instance in verse 14: ‘Remember the Lord ... and fight.’⁵
 - i. There is a blend of God’s sovereignty and human action through this book. → **Are we willing cooperate with God’s plans to see them come to fruition?**
 - c. Let’s be honest – Nehemiah’s prayer is uncomfortable... he is essentially praying for their destruction.
 - i. Why does he do this? → He sees their opposition as opposition and defiance against God himself.
 - d. **What do we pray?**
 - i. We ask the Lord to give us strength, discernment, and wisdom.
 - ii. We ask the Lord to give us favor and open doors for charitable conversations.
 - iii. We ask the Lord to move them on.
 2. **Hostile threats** – Pray and post a guard. (cf. 4:7-9)
 - a. Nehemiah now realizes that the empty threats of Sanballat and Tobiah are gaining substance and he responds accordingly.
 - i. He continues his praying. → **His confidence went deeper: *Our God will fight for us* (20).** He knew the truth of Psalm 127: ‘Unless the Lord builds ... Unless the Lord watches over the city ... It is in vain.’⁶
 - b. Prayer and right action → Not one or the other.

³ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 99.

⁴ Larry Osborne, *Nehemiah: How to Lead Anything* (2004)

⁵ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 99–100.

⁶ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 102.

- i. It was characteristic of Nehemiah to regard prayer and action as the necessary and complementary ways to face each developing situation.⁷
- ii. This begs the classic illustration of the man stranded during a flood. → He asks God to rescue him. God sends two different boats and, finally, a helicopter. The man refuses all and dies. He then asks God why he didn't save him. God answers, I sent two boats and a helicopter... what else did you want?
- c. **Do we have voices in our lives that help us process right decisions in the midst of hostile threats?**
 - i. Yes, to prayer.
 - ii. Yes, to right action.
 - 1. This can be tricky or vague in our lives. That is why we need Godly counsel from others.

3. **Fatigue and fear** – Take those fears seriously.

- a. Acknowledges and addresses the concerns of the people (cf. 4:10-15)
 - i. This begs the question for us whether we are listening and paying attention to what is going on.
 - ii. As the threat increased, Nehemiah increased his actionable response.
 - 1. **He doesn't stop praying and doesn't stop seeing God as the source of their victory.**
- b. Makes practical plans for defense. (cf. 4:16-23)
 - i. He does this so that he can stay focused on the work of the larger mission.
 - ii. **So we built the wall: the sturdy simplicity of that statement**, and of the behavior it records, makes Sanballat and his friends suddenly appear rather small and shrill, dwarfed by the faith, unity and energy of the weak.⁸
 - iii. **The "restoration of the walls" is referred to by way of a metaphor derived from the healing of a wound.** The expression is found also at 2 Chr 24:13, so that it may have been a regular idiom.⁹

b. Internal fights – desertions and loans and slaves

- i. **Scared people flee** – The pressure is mounting and they are not wrong.
 - 1. The wives of the men working on the wall were afraid of what was to come.
 - a. They want their sons and husbands back home to
 - b. The somewhat unusual reference to the wives may not so much reflect the intensity of the suffering, as is generally thought, as it does the fact that they were more conscious of the approaching calamity because they were having to manage at home while their husbands were engrossed in the wall-building.¹⁰
 - c. The troubles were real enough. Verse 2 reveals a natural tendency to argue that too much was being sacrificed to Nehemiah's project. 'After all', as such citizens might have put it, 'you can't eat walls.'¹¹

2. Nehemiah doesn't downplay the reality of the seriousness of the situation.

⁷ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 226.

⁸ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 99.

⁹ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 225.

¹⁰ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 236–237.

¹¹ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 103.

- a. When you are caring for someone who is scared, it never helps to say, “It’s no big deal.”
- b. **Instead, Nehemiah diagnoses the real problem... bad loans and extortion.**

ii. Hurt people, hurt people.

1. The reality is that they have been in exile for 100+ years at this point.
 - a. 606-536 BC – 70 year Assyrian exile.
 - b. 444 BC – the period of the wall construction.
 - c. They have been impacted and changed in ways that aren’t even present to them over the generations of living in exile.
2. There are three groups of people in chapter 5 that are being pressed for resources.
 - a. **The first group** we take to refer to families who owned no land. They were dependent on wages from laboring of whatever sort. Since we have no evidence that Nehemiah paid wages to the builders, the families of these men were becoming destitute. Not unreasonably, they asked for basic sustenance to be provided.¹²
 - b. **The second group** are clearly differentiated from the first in that they owned land that they could use as security against a loan to tide them over the period of difficulty. (However, the danger was now looming, we must suppose, that they would not be able to repay these loans because of the added burden imposed by the wall-building. In these circumstances they would probably choose first to sell their children.
 - i. Harsh as this may seem, they would then still own their means of livelihood which would enable them to redeem their children. Once their land was forfeit, however, irreversible debt-slavery would soon inevitably follow.¹³
 - c. **The situation of the third group** was yet again slightly different: they too were evidently landowners who were falling into debt, but this time because they needed to borrow in order to pay their taxes.¹⁴
 - i. Since the time of Darius there was a fixed annual land tax assessed “on the basis of an average yield from the land, for each satrapy, taking into account, of course, the kind of cultivation as well as the average amount of the yield.”¹⁵
 - d. The loaning of money on pledge and the practice of debt-slavery were not illegal as such; cf. **Exod 21:2–11; 22:24–26 (25–27); Lev 25; Deut 15:1–18; 24:10–13**. The laws, however, are concerned to protect the minimal rights of the very poor. Some of their stipulations were clearly unsuitable for the present emergency. For instance, the “year of release,” if it was ever regularly observed, was evidently not sufficiently soon to offer the prospect of speedy alleviation; such a possibility simply passes without mention.¹⁶

iii. Leaders help and set the example. (cf. 5:1-19) ¹⁷

1. Nehemiah responds by not only diagnosing what was wrong, but he gave them a path forward, and then led the way with his own generosity.

¹² H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 237.

¹³ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 237.

¹⁴ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 238.

¹⁵ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 238.

¹⁶ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 238.

¹⁷ Larry Osborne, *Nehemiah: How to Lead Anything* (2004)

- a. **The wrong addressed** - In amplifying his charge, Nehemiah first points out the moral absurdity of what has been going on. In line with the procedure envisaged in Lev 25:47–48, the Jewish community had been rescuing by payment of a redemption price as many of their fellows who had had to sell themselves to the Gentiles as their limited resources allowed.¹⁸
 - b. The path forward - **He reveals his twofold motivation: first, filial reverence for God, which restrained him from ‘lording it over the people’ (15b), and made heaven’s verdict all-important to him (19); and second, brotherly compassion, ‘because the servitude was heavy upon this people’ (18).** In his own brusque style he exemplified the two great commandments, and anticipated the cheerful disregard of one’s entitlements which Paul would expound in 1 Corinthians 9.¹⁹
 - c. Nehemiah prays in detail that his work and self-sacrificial generosity may stand as an **eternal memorial to his purity of motive** and dedication in service both to God and his fellow Jews.²⁰
2. **The larger work of Nehemiah is to continue leading the people into a restored identity and a God-centered worldview.** → They might have been physical exiles, but they belong to something so much greater... God’s family.

2. Life as an exile... when home isn’t home.

- a. Again, the larger pursuit of the 100 year period of Ezra (scribe), Zerubbabel (priest), and Nehemiah (governor) was the reformation or reconstruction of the covenant identity of God’s people.
 - i. Yes, they were in their homeland.
 - ii. No, it will never really be “theirs” again.
 - iii. Their true home was never meant to only be contained on this side of heaven.
 - iv. There is a truth in all of this for us → We are spiritual exiles. → What does that mean?
- b. Home... sort of... but not really. 1 Pet. 2:9-11
 - i. **⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. ¹¹ Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. ¹² Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.**
 - ii. **The simple reality of Peter’s words are unpacked in the following statements.**
 - 1. You are a new people → I.e., You belong to something great and set apart.
 - a. Your new status is an act of mercy.
 - 2. Your purpose is to praise God.
 - 3. Since you no longer belong to this age, don’t act like you do.
 - a. I.e., You were playing football... now you’re playing basketball.
 - b. I.e., You were playing checkers... now you’re playing chess.

¹⁸ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 239.

¹⁹ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 107.

²⁰ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 245.

- c. I.e., Nehemiah → You were acting like Assyrians and Babylonians... now act like God's people.
- 4. The substance of your life matters because it is reflective of the one who has done a great work in you.
- c. **Opposition is part of the exile life** - The first thing we have to understand about opposition is that it comes to discourage kingdom productivity—that is, God's work in our lives.²¹
 - i. Paul reminds us of the work of the enemy – Eph 6:10-13
 - 1. **¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. ¹¹ Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. ¹² For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³ Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.**
 - ii. Jesus also teaches us about the nature of the enemy – Jn. 10:10
 - 1. **¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.**
 - iii. Nehemiah is not surprised at the opposition. → In fact, he expected it. That is why he took the king's guard with him. (cf. 2:9)
 - 1. We should not be surprised when we experience opposition because we are living as exiles in our homeland.
 - a. **We do need to ask the question, "Is this opposition because I am following Jesus in a life-defining way or because I've been a jerk?"**
- d. **How do Christian exiles respond?**
 - i. Jesus followers protect themselves but do not retaliate.
 - 1. Remember, Nehemiah does not provoke violence or conflict, but he isn't naive about the reality of what they are facing.
 - 2. I.e., We are to operate in wisdom – Wisdom is the right application of knowledge.
 - ii. Jesus followers stay focused on the mission:
 - 1. **What about our sons, our daughters, and our wives? What might it look like to fight for them? Fighting for your children means fighting to ensure that they can't remember a day when Jesus wasn't being invested into their souls. It means developing a family worship time in which you point the whole household heavenward. It means creating memories for your children of precious worship and times of prayer; it means teaching them the Bible. It means talking to them about what it means to follow Christ.**²²
 - iii. Jesus followers remember the One they are representing.
 - 1. Peter – Live such a good life...
 - 2. Nehemiah – Sets the example to show a better way via God.

3. Tension of exile... now and not yet.

- a. A better country – Heb 11:13-16
 - i. **¹³ These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and**

²¹ Mason, Eric. Nehemiah For You: Strength to Build for God (God's Word For You) (p. 57). The Good Book Company. Kindle Edition.

²² Mason, Eric. Nehemiah For You: Strength to Build for God (God's Word For You) (p. 70). The Good Book Company. Kindle Edition.

exiles on the earth. ¹⁴ For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

- ii. This passage speaks of the patriarchs in the OT as exiles seeking a homeland. They were looking for something better.
 - 1. Since we are exiles, we long for something better.
- iii. The reality that we are not home, is always going to leave us in tension with the world around us.
 - 1. If you do not feel that tension, that is something to explore.
 - 2. We will experience the “what’s better” in part now, and in full in the age to come.
 - a. If we only associate the “what’s better” with a certain political or social perspective and cannot critique our “side” then we need to evaluate that. That is not what being a Christian exile is about.
- b. **Confusion** – How to do the next right thing.
 - i. The reality is that the oppression Nehemiah and the people were facing was confusing and disorienting.
 - ii. When we face a tension point or experience opposition we should not be surprised by:
 - 1. **Confusion** – We aren’t going to know what to do.
 - 2. **Rationalization** – When we are confused, we begin to rationalize and make excuses.
 - iii. In order to make our way through the confusion and do the next right thing, we need a guiding perspective, a compass.
- c. **Worldview** – Our guiding perspective and compass.
 - i. A worldview is: The lens in which you interpret the events, actions, and ideas of the world you’re living in.
 - ii. **We must commit to the renewing of our minds. – Rom. 12:2**
 - 1. ² **Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.**
 - 2. **“It’s called the brain: “The brain should act as a sort of mental immune system, examining cultural ideas as they come in, considering their likely consequences, rejecting the ones that are liable to do harm and accepting those that are apt to help.” – Dr. Kevin Vanhoozer ²³**
 - a. To follow Jesus in a life-defining way, means that his priorities, perspectives, and precepts become ours in an increasing way.
 - b. This means we are to increasingly feel at odds with or in tension with the prevailing mantras of the culture of this age.
 - iii. **A worldview answers the following questions:**
 - 1. What is prime reality—the really real?
 - 2. What is the nature of external reality, that is, the world around us?
 - 3. What is a human being?

²³ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “What Is Everyday Theology?: How and Why Christians Should Read Culture,” in *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Charles A. Anderson, and Michael J. Sleasman, Cultural Exegesis (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 31.

4. What happens to a person at death?
 5. Why is it possible to know anything at all?
 6. How do we know what is right and wrong?
 7. What is the meaning of human history?
 8. What personal, life-orienting core commitments are consistent with this worldview?
- iv. How do we construct a distinctly Christian worldview?**
1. **A foundational authority** – The Bible
 - a. A mirror to see ourselves and a lens to see God.
 2. **Educate** – Commit yourself to learning God’s values.
 3. **Evaluate** – As you interact with culture evaluate what you are hearing and seeing against what you know to be true from Scripture.
 - a. Both education and evaluation happen in community and continue to be a process over time.
 4. **Be humble** – Remember that our tendency is to drift away from the values of the kingdom and to settle for the values of this age. Pride will tell you that you are always right, humility will allow you to practice repentance and growth.
 - a. Humility also allows us to resist the dangerous idea that Christianity is a monolith when it comes to culture, theology, and, specifically, political policies.
 - b. There are things the church has always agreed on. → That is orthodoxy.
 - c. Then there is liberty for non-essentials.
 - d. Finally, charity in all other things. → I.e., It is possible to read the same texts, come up with the same ethical conviction, and see the best way to implement that conviction in society through different policies.
- v. As we continue to journey with Nehemiah and his people, we will watch the unfolding process of their worldview reconstruction.**
1. The question we must ask ourselves, **“What elements of my worldview need to be reconstructed and refined to be more Jesus and gospel centered?”**