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July 26th: Nehemiah 4 & John 3:22-36

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Judah's neighbours threaten the wall rebuilders. John decreasing so that Jesus might increase.

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Transcript

Nehemiah chapter 4. Now when Sambalot heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews. 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? Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, Yes, what are they building? If a fox goes up on it, he will break down their stone wall. 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. 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. So we

built the wall, and all the wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work.

But when Sambalot and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashtodites 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 to cause confusion in it. And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night.

In Judah it was said, The strength of those who bear the burdens is failing. There is too much rubble. By ourselves we will not be able to rebuild the wall.

And our enemies said, They will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work. At that time the Jews who lived near them came from all directions and said to us ten times, You must return to us. So in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, in open places, I stationed the people by their clans, with their swords, their spears and their bows.

And I looked and arose and said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives and your homes. When our enemies heard that it was known to us and that God had frustrated their plan, we all returned to the wall, each to his work.

From that day on half of my servants worked on construction, and half held the spears, shields, bows and coats of mail. And the leaders stood behind the whole house of Judah, who were building on the wall. Those who carried burdens were loaded in such a way that each laboured on the work with one hand and held his weapon with the other.

And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built. The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me. And I said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, The work is great and widely spread, and we are separated on the wall, far from one another.

In the place where you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us. So we laboured at the work, and half of them held the spears from the break of dawn until the stars came out.

I also said to the people at that time, Let every man and his servant pass the night within Jerusalem, that they may be a guard for us by night, and may labour by day. So neither I nor my brothers nor my servants nor the men of the guard who followed me, none of us took off our clothes. Each kept his weapon at his right hand.

The rebuilding of the wall does not occur without substantial opposition. In Nehemiah chapter 4, Sambalek the governor of Samaria and Tobiah the Ammonite resist the Jews'

efforts with taunts and plots. Having heard about the rebuilding of the wall, Sambalek ridiculed the Jews publicly, before his fellow rulers and his army.

He insists that the Jews are pathetic and insufficient for the task. They would not be able to restore the wall without external help, and none would be forthcoming from their neighbours. Even were they to appeal to their God, in whom they were apparently placing their trust, his strength would not be enough.

Their efforts were futile and doomed. They didn't seem to appreciate the scale of the task ahead of them. This was not the task of a single day.

A new wall would not easily be established from the burned rubble of the old demolished one. Tobiah the Ammonite, like a cartoon sidekick, adds his own dismissive taunt to Sambalek's. The wall of the Jews is so weak that even a fox clambering up on it would threaten its integrity.

An impenetrable defence for the city it certainly is not. Nirmai wisely does not seem to retort to the taunts of the opponents, or enter into a sparring match with his adversaries. Rather he turns to the Lord, putting matters in his hands.

He calls for the Lord to attend to the situation faced by the builders. The Lord and his people are despised and ridiculed by these rulers, and Nirmai records in what was presumably his memoirs, his prayer that the Lord bring them to account for their sin. Nirmai and the builders have not sought to attack Sambalek and his confederates, but they have threatened and ridiculed the Jews without any cause.

Nirmai's prayer here is akin to those found in the imprecatory psalms of scripture. This is one of several occasions in scripture where we see imprecatory prayer being used in more specific historical circumstances. Andrew Steinman and other commentators note the close verbal resemblance between the first half of verse 5 and Nirmai chapter 18 verse 23.

Yet you, O Lord, know all their plotting to kill me. Forgive not their iniquity, nor blot out their sin from your sight. Let them be overthrown before you.

Deal with them in the time of your anger. Nirmai is not taking vengeance. Rather he turns to the Lord, to whom vengeance belongs.

The enemies of the Jews will only bring disaster upon themselves by their strife. The builders persevere with their project and achieve considerable success, as, while much work remains, they have established a complete wall around the circumference of the city, to half the intended height of the final wall. The most potent response that they can give to the taunts of their adversaries is prayer and effective labour.

Word once again reaches the adversaries of the Jews. Sambalat, Tobiah, the Arabs,

Ammonites and the Ashdodites. The Jews have enemies on all sides, and they all seem to be in league with each other against Judah.

Sambalat has power in the north, in Samaria. Tobiah and the Ammonites hold power to the east. The Arabs are to the south of the Jews.

Ashdod, a Philistine city, is to the west. Now they all move beyond taunts, to plots, conspiring together to fight against Jerusalem and to prevent the wall building by force. They do not want to tolerate the rising up of the Jews as a power and presence in their region again.

Nehemiah and the Jews get wind of their plots, turn to God in prayer and take action to secure the city and the wall building. Morale, however, fell in Judah, following the threat of military force being used against them while they were still so vulnerable, and the daunting scale of the task remaining. Soon there were those in Judah who were echoing the taunts of Sambalat from earlier in the chapter, now as expressions of depression, despair and dismay.

Soon the builders were facing opposition from their own surrounding Jewish countrymen also, who, realising that they would be the first to be attacked if the adversaries came up against Jerusalem, sought to dissuade the builders in order to appease the threatening neighbours. The project is starting to seem quite precarious at this point. Nehemiah, however, posted men at all of the vulnerable points in the wall and exhorted the disheartened people, while they might face opposition on all sides threatening to extinguish the light of Judah.

Ultimately their opponents would not have the best of any conflict, as the Lord is with his people. At each point he had been equipping his people, stirring up the hearts of kings and rulers, providing for their necessities and enabling them to overcome opposition. They must trust him at this crucial point too.

He will fight for them. The enemy's hope seemed to be that letting out the rumour of an attack upon Jerusalem would be enough to get the Jews to back down and abandon the building project. The fact that they had responded by strengthening their defences and Nehemiah had been able to restore the resolve of the people greatly frustrated their plan.

They had presumed that their barking would be sufficient and wouldn't need to be followed by any bite. It seems that Nehemiah ended up calling their bluff. From that point onwards however, the rebuilding work had to be undertaken with military force and strategy, each builder also functioning as a soldier and guard and watchman, equipped with a weapon along with his building tools.

Given the scale of the tasks still to be undertaken and the many points of potential

weakness remaining in the wall, Nehemiah also had to prepare the people so that men could rally quickly to any point in the wall where an assault might come. So vigilant was Nehemiah and his companions that all remained dressed and armed at all times, ready to be called to the defence of the city in a moment. A question to consider.

How does this chapter resemble earlier scriptural accounts of Holy War? Can you think of similarities with any specific stories? John chapter 3 verses 22-36. After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside and he remained there with them and was baptising. John also was baptising at Enan near Salem because water was plentiful there and people were coming and being baptised, for John had not yet been put in prison.

Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification and they came to John and said to him, Rabbi, he who is with you across the Jordan to whom you bore witness, look he is baptising and all are going to know him. John answered, a person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness that I said, I am not the Christ but I have been sent before him.

The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom who stands and hears him rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete.

He must increase but I must decrease. He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way.

He who comes from heaven is above all. He bears witness to what he has seen and heard. Yet no one receives his testimony.

Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this that God is true. For he whom God has sent utters the words of God. For he gives the spirit without measure.

The father loves the son and has given all things into his hand. Whoever believes in the son has eternal life. Whoever does not obey the son shall not see life but the wrath of God remains on him.

At the conclusion of John chapter 3 we return to the witness of John the Baptist. There is perhaps a contrast to be drawn between John's clear and powerful witness and Nicodemus the teacher of the Jews who nonetheless failed to perceive who Jesus was and what Israel needed. John here also reveals amazing divinely revealed insight into who Jesus is and his significance.

There are several points here where we can see the threads of chapter 1 being picked up again, providing a broader introduction to the ministry of Jesus, tying things together between chapters 1 and 3, bookending the beginning of Jesus' ministry. At this point Jesus and his disciples are operating in the Judean countryside, whereas the Synoptic Gospels focus more upon Jesus' ministry in the north in Galilee. In John's Gospel the

central gravity of the narrative throughout is situated in Jerusalem.

Similarly, in the Synoptics we don't read of Jesus and his disciples performing any baptisms prior to Pentecost. Jesus' disciples are here baptising, in association with his kingdom movement. As we discover at the beginning of chapter 4, Jesus is having considerable success at this point, with many followers joining him and being baptised.

However, as the Evangelist mentions there, Jesus himself does not baptise, but rather his disciples do. Jesus then has a baptismal movement like John, yet he is not personally baptising. He is the minister of a greater baptism that has yet to come, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and it is important that nothing be confused with that.

We might wonder what the meaning of the baptism that Jesus' disciples are administering at this point is. Earlier John the Witness declared that he was sent to baptise, to reveal the coming one to Israel. However, his baptism seems to have broader meaning than this, as we see in this passage where he and his disciples discuss rituals of purification with the Jew.

Beyond the central task of manifesting Christ himself, John is preparing a people for Christ's appearance. The baptism performed by Jesus' disciples at this juncture likely has a similar purpose. It is not yet the sort of baptism that would follow Pentecost, but it cleanses people and connects them with the Jesus movement.

Given the large number of baptisms that he is performing with his disciples, John needed a place with plenty of water. However, we don't know exactly where Enon was. The Gospel writer makes a parenthetical remark at this point that John the Baptist had not yet been thrown into prison, a detail about which he never says anything further in the Gospel, as it would distract him from the story that he is telling.

However, this might be one of several details in the Gospel that suggest that John was writing for people he presumed were familiar with another Gospel, or perhaps some other non-canonical accounts of Jesus, whether written accounts or oral testimony. John was not writing in a vacuum. While his claims have been criticised in some quarters, Richard Borkin, for instance, has argued that John presumed a familiarity with the synoptic tradition of Mark of his readers.

It is important to bear in mind that early Christians would generally have been exposed to more than one Gospel tradition. Luke, for instance, can refer to many having attempted to write accounts of the ministry of Christ, an exposure to a plurality of eyewitness accounts. If John was able to presume such an audience for his Gospel, his Gospel would not need to be a solitary and self-standing work.

Rather, it could leave out many episodes of Jesus' story and downplay various aspects of his ministry and teaching without fear of leaving his audience uninformed concerning

them. More than any of the other Gospels, John reveals the overlap between the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus. In chapter 1, John's witness to Jesus is front and centre of his ministry in a manner far more pronounced than in the synoptics.

Jesus' first followers are former disciples of John who were pointed in his direction by John. In this chapter we see further overlap between John and Jesus' ministry as both of their groups are carrying out similar baptism ministries simultaneously and establishing followings. However, Jesus' following has started to eclipse John's.

John's disciples have discussions about purification with the Jew. It is important to remember that baptism was a form of purification rite arising in a context where many such rites were practised. The rite of baptism was not introduced whole cloth by John in a situation where no similar practice existed before.

We find lots of washings in the Old Testament, perhaps most notably the washing received by the priests as part of the ritual of their initiation into their service. Various other ritual washings were practised by Jewish communities during this period and the meaning of John's practice would not have been utterly bizarre to his contemporaries. Rather, it would have been seen as a more radical form of practices that were familiar in other contexts, making it possible for John and his disciples to have debates about purification with other people of their time.

It should further be noted here that the language of Jew or the Jews is used at many points within John's Gospel, often with a very negative connotation. This language is not referring to people who are just Jews in the more generic sense that we might typically use it. It usually seems to refer more specifically to leaders of the people, the leading groups associated with Judea and Jerusalem.

It's not used of people in Galilee in quite the same way. We might think about the way people in the US might talk about the folk in DC. When talking about the folk in DC it's usually obvious that people are not speaking in a manner inclusive of people in a poor neighbourhood in Washington.

They're talking about the people in power. Likewise, much of the language that's used in reference to the Jews in John's Gospel is used in that sort of narrow sense. In this period of overlap between the two ministries, John speaks more directly to the question of succession, of how his ministry would decrease and Jesus' increase.

He uses the illustration of the bridegroom and the friend of the bridegroom. This should draw our minds back to the beginning of Jesus' ministry and the sign at the wedding of Cana. Also, as the friend of the bridegroom, one of John's tasks would have been to serve as a witness to the marriage and to speak on behalf of the bridegroom at certain points.

John especially emphasises the joy that he feels – joy of course being the appropriate

response and emotion for a wedding. John's Gospel will later foreground that theme of joy in the context of the resurrection. John's purpose is not his own elevation, but witness to Jesus.

Consequently, he is not in the least threatened by Jesus' ministry eclipsing his own. Indeed, his purpose was always to reveal the Christ, to direct people towards him and to pass on the baton of his ministry to the Christ. Hearing of the increase of Jesus' ministry and his profile is a cause of great joy to him for this reason.

His own ministry is having its desired effect. The chapter ends with a section that many have seen as reverting to the words of the Gospel writer. You can see this in many translations, for instance.

On the other hand, it may continue the words of John the Baptist. Rather than John's words ending with he must increase but I must decrease, John's words may run to the end of the chapter. John had previously borne witness to the one coming after him back in chapter 1. Now he or the Gospel writer speak of the coming one as the one who comes from above.

The similarities between this section and Jesus' statements to Nicodemus earlier in the chapter are not difficult to recognize. Both have a strong vertical polarity, a contrast between above and below. Both speak of the contrast between earthly things and heavenly things.

Both talk about the receiving of testimony. The final statement here also recalls Jesus' own statements earlier, back in verses 16-18. By recalling these earlier statements at the end of the chapter it bookends the whole and perhaps invites us to draw stronger connections between the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus and that between John and the Jew.

These verses present an incredibly high account of who Christ is. He comes from above. He is a first hand witness of the things of God and of heaven.

He utters the very words of God. He has the spirit without measure. He is loved by the Father and has received all things from him.

Our response to him is the difference between condemnation and eternal life. It is difficult to imagine a higher Christology than this. It also connects Jesus more firmly with the earlier themes of the conversation with Nicodemus in underlining his heavenly origin and his enjoyment of the spirit without measure.

He is the man of the spirit. He is the one equipped to baptise people with the spirit so that they might enjoy the kingdom of God. A question to consider.

What is the difference between the baptism performed by Jesus' disciples at this point

and the baptisms that they would perform after Pentecost?