

Nehemiah 4 — The Trowel and the Sword — Mockery, Conspiracy, and the Wall That Rose Anyway

Nehemiah 4: as Jerusalem's wall goes up under Nehemiah the governor, Sanballat and Tobiah escalate from public mockery to a plotted armed assault; the builders answer with prayer and a posted watch, then work with a weapon in one hand — the rebuilding of the wall, c. 445 BC (scriptural chronology; the twentieth year of Artaxerxes I, secularly c. 445 BC).

Chapter 3 is one of the quietest triumphs in the Old Testament: a long, unglamorous roll call of who built what. The high priest and his brethren built the sheep gate; the sons of Hassenaah built the fish gate; goldsmiths and apothecaries and rulers and daughters each took their sections, "next unto him" and "over against his house" stitching the list together. It reads like a construction ledger, and that is exactly its glory — a whole city taking up lengths of broken wall, each beside their own front door. Chapter 3 is the wall going up.

Hebrew Word Studies

leb (H3820) (לֵב) — heart, mind, inner self, will v. 6. The King James "the people had a *mind* to work" translates *leb* — the heart. In Hebrew thought the heart is not merely the seat of emotion but the whole inner command center: mind, will, courage, and desire fused into one. So the wall does not reach its halfway height because the workers found a technique or the enemy relented; it rises because the people had *heart* for it. This is the same word behind the great commandment, "thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine *heart*" (Deut. 6:5), and behind the free-will offerings for another sacred building project — the tabernacle — where "every one whose heart stirred him up" brought his gift (Ex. 35:21). The Book of Mormon carries the identical conviction: the Lord looks past the hands to the *leb*, for "if a man... giveth a gift, or prayeth unto God, except he shall do it with real intent it profiteth him nothing" (Moro. 7:6). A mind to work is the whole secret of verse 6: give the Lord's people a heart for the labor, and mockery and fatigue cannot keep the wall from rising.

palal (H6419) (פָּלַל) — to pray, to intercede, to intervene v. 9. "We made our *prayer* unto our God" uses the verb *palal*, from which comes *tefillah*, the ordinary Hebrew word for prayer. The root carries a sense of intervening or mediating — of stepping into the gap between a situation and God and asking Him to act. It is the word for Abraham interceding for Sodom, for Moses standing between the Lord and rebellious Israel, for Hannah pouring out her soul at Shiloh (1 Sam. 1:10, where she "prayed unto the LORD"). What makes verse 9 the theological center of the chapter is the pairing: Nehemiah *palal*, and in the same breath "set a watch." The intervention of prayer does not cancel the labor of vigilance; it commissions it. This is the pattern the risen Christ pressed on the Nephites — "ye must watch and pray always, lest ye be tempted by the devil" (3 Ne. 18:15) — and the Lord's own standing counsel, "pray always, that you may come off conqueror" (D&C 10:5). Nehemiah's builders prayed as though everything depended on God and watched as though something depended on them, and the wall went up between the two.

mishmar (H4929) (מִשְׁמָר) — a watch, guard, place of guarding v. 9. "Set a *watch* against them day and night" — the noun is *mishmar*, from the verb *shamar*, "to keep, guard, watch over." It is a word soaked in covenant duty: the Lord set Adam in the garden "to dress it and to *keep* it" (Gen. 2:15), and Israel was commanded to *keep* the commandments and *keep* the sabbath with this same root family. A *mishmar* is a posted guard, a shift of watchmen — and Nehemiah sets one "day and night," an unbroken vigil. The image reaches forward to the watchmen on the walls whom Isaiah invokes, who "shall never hold their peace day nor night" (Isa. 62:6), and to the Savior's warning to "watch, for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come" (Matt. 24:42). Spiritual vigilance is not paranoia; it is the *mishmar* of a covenant people who love what they are guarding. Nehemiah pairs it deliberately with prayer (v. 9): the watch is what faith looks like with its boots on.

zakar (H2142) (זָכַר) — to remember, to bring to mind, to keep in memory v. 14. "Be not ye afraid of them: *remember* the Lord, which is great and terrible." The verb is *zakar*, and in scripture it means far more than mental recall — it means to bring a fact into the present so that it governs how you act now. When God "remembered" Noah (Gen. 8:1) or "remembered" His covenant (Ex. 2:24), He moved to act on it. So Nehemiah's cure for fear is not a feeling but a deliberate act of memory: drag the greatness of God back into a frame that fear had shrunk to the size of the threat. This is the great Book of Mormon imperative — Helaman's "remember, remember" (Hel. 5:12), Moroni's whole closing appeal, and the sacramental promise that we "always *remember* him" so that we "may always have his Spirit" (Moro. 4:3). Fear and forgetting travel together; courage and remembrance travel together. Set beside the danger the one larger fact — "the Lord, which is great and terrible" — and the danger finds its true and smaller proportion.

gadol (H1419) (גָּדוֹל) — **great, large, mighty v. 14.** "Remember the Lord, which is *great* and terrible." *Gadol* is the everyday Hebrew adjective for great — great in size, in importance, in might — and here it is stacked with "terrible" (*yare*, awe-inspiring, to be feared) to describe the God whose greatness dwarfs the threat. The pairing is a fixed formula of Israel's worship: "the LORD your God is God of gods, and Lord of lords, a *great* God, a mighty, and a terrible" (Deut. 10:17); "great and marvellous are thy works, Lord God Almighty" (Rev. 15:3). What Nehemiah does with the word is pastoral genius. The builders are staring at a *great* and large work they cannot finish (the same *gadol* appears in v. 19, "the work is great and large") and a great danger they cannot fight. Nehemiah answers a great work and a great fear with a *greater* God. The adjective is the same; the question is only which greatness you set at the center — and the whole chapter turns on putting the *gadol* of the Lord above the *gadol* of the wall and the threat alike.

From the Chapter's Architecture

It is a straight escalation, not a chiasm, and I will not pretend otherwise; the artistry is in the relentless doubling. Watch the pattern and you see it everywhere: prayer and a watch, a hand for the work and a hand for the weapon, labor by day and guard by night, the trumpet that gathers and the God who defends, families to fight for and a Lord to fight for them. The whole chapter is a lesson in the word and — the refusal to set faith against works, trust against vigilance, or building against defending. And a quiet frame holds it together: it opens with an enemy who "heard that we builded the wall" and grew wroth (v. 1), and turns at the exposure of the plot when "our enemies heard that it was known unto us" and their counsel came to nought (v. 15). What the enemy hears drives the whole action — first to rage, finally to retreat.