

**“Through the Bible in a Year with Pastor Don and the FBC Family”**  
**June 22, 2016**

**Nehemiah 4:1–5:19.** Opposition to God’s Work.

**1 John 4:16–21.** Love and the Judgment Seat of Jesus Christ.

**Psalms 109:1–15.** Imprecatory psalms: praying for cursing on the enemies of God.

**COMMENTS:**

**Nehemiah 4:1–5:19.** Chapter 4 begins with Sanballat, a governor of Samaria, mocking Nehemiah and his fellow Jews. A real test of virtue is how a person faces a crisis and reacts to pressure of ridicule. In this chapter we see several forms of opposition and how Nehemiah confronted them. In Nehemiah we have a prime example of a calm, dedicated, faithful, wise, and strong leader (which reminds me of our strong and calm Nehemiah Fischer) who put his confidence in God first and foremost. Instead of returning insults and stooping to Sanballat’s level, Nehemiah turned to the Lord in prayer in 4:4-5. In this prayer, Nehemiah asks for God to act, rather than ask God for permission to take personal vengeance. When Sanballat and his friends realized that their ridicule was not successful in stopping the work on the wall, their anger increased, and their plans escalated in 4:7 as Sanballat succeeds in enlisting others nations in his malevolent alliance. Jerusalem was now surrounded by enemies: the Samaritans on the north, the Ammonites on the east, the Arabians on the south, and the men of Ashdod on the west. This alliance against Israel could have easily destroyed all of the Jews. Moreover, an excuse could have been sent to the king that Jerusalem was rebelling. Note the theism and realism in verse 9 as Nehemiah prayed and took precautions. In other words, he trusted God, but also was aware of the dangers and took the necessary precautions. It is foolhardy and a form of anti-realism not to understand that God works through natural means in concurrence. In 4:10, the opposition becomes far more dangerous in that it now comes from within the family of God. However, as a great leader Nehemiah took action (4:13), which led to the enemies realizing they could not surprise the Jews and so their plot withered away as “God brought it to nothing” through His withdrawal of efficient causality. In chapter 5 we have more opposition within the believing community sparked by economic crisis. In sum there were four problems. First, the people faced a food shortage. They said they needed to get grain for food to keep themselves and their families alive (5:2). The work on the wall hindered their tending their crops. And this crop failure was called a famine. Second, others had grain (buying it from others), but to get it they had to mortgage their fields and homes (5:3). Third, others, not wanting to mortgage their property, had to borrow money from their Jewish brothers to pay property taxes to King Artaxerxes (5:4). This problem was compounded by the fact that they were charged exorbitant interest rates by their own Jewish brothers. This led to a fourth problem. To repay their creditors they had to sell their children into slavery (5:5). Not only were their enemies a constant threat to their security and state of well-being, but now many Jews were actually taking advantage of other Jews. Morale, which was already low (Neh. 4:10–12) because of external pressures, physical exhaustion, and fear, now took another plunge because of these internal problems. Nehemiah confronted the situation head on. First, he rebuked those who were violating God’s command not to charge their own people interest (cf. Ex. 22:25; Lev. 25:35–38; Deut. 23:19–20). Money could be loaned (Deut. 15:7–8) but not to gain interest from another person’s distresses. Second, calling a “large meeting,” Nehemiah pointed out the inconsistencies

of their behavior compared with what he and others in exile had done personally to help their “brothers.” He and others had already purchased (redeemed) some indentured Jews who were sold to foreigners (cf. Lev. 25:47–55). But now the opposite was happening; Jews were “selling” their fellow Jews into slavery. Also God’s reputation was at stake. This immoral and unethical behavior was bringing reproach on the One who had delivered their country from both Egyptian bondage and Babylonian Captivity. So he exhorted them to live in the fear of . . . God (i.e., to trust, obey, and serve Him) and thus avoid the reproach of their Gentile enemies. Nehemiah then asked those guilty of exploitation to return what they had taken from others. Mortgaged “fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses” were to be returned (perhaps with the income made from the “grain, new wine, and oil” from those fields), charging interest (“usury”) was to stop, and the interest received from the loans was to be returned. Following this we have the people’s positive response (5:12-13) and Nehemiah’s noble service as governor and how he did not use his position for personal enrichment. What a man of virtue! Note the Source of his spiritual virtue in 5:19.

**1 John 4:16–21.** John returns to the theme of boldness at the Lord’s return that he introduced in 2:28. He now goes a step further and links loving Christians with boldness at the Judgment Seat of Christ (JSJC). 4:17 can be rendered, literally, “In this respect love is made complete with us, namely, that we should have boldness in the day of judgment.” The writer was not referring here to a final judgment in which the eternal destiny of each believer hangs in balance. There is no such judgment for a believer (John 5:24). But a believer’s life will be assessed at the judgment seat of Christ (1 Cor. 3:12–15; 2 Cor. 5:10). Yet even on that solemn occasion, a believer may have confidence that God will approve the quality of his life if, through love, that believer while in this world becomes like Him. An unloving Christian is unlike his Lord and may anticipate rebuke and loss of reward at the JSJC. But a loving believer is one in whom the work of God’s love has been made complete, and the fruit of that is boldness before the One who will judge him. In this way he achieves the goal of confidence and no shame before Him, expressed in 2:28. 4:18–19: If a believer looks forward with trepidation to the judgment seat of Christ, it is because God’s love has not yet reached completeness in Him. The matured experience of God’s love (reached in the act of loving one another) is incompatible with fear and expels fear from the heart. The words “fear has to do with punishment” are literally, “fear has punishment.” Fear carries with it a kind of torment that is its own punishment. Ironically, an unloving believer experiences punishment precisely because he feels guilty and is afraid to meet his Judge. Such fear prohibits a completed love (one who fears is not made perfect in love). But a Christian who loves has nothing to fear and thus escapes the inner torment which a failure to love can bring. Loving God and others is not an option for a healthy spiritual life and a positive evaluation of the JSJC. Such love is absolutely necessary for there to be any truly robust and thriving spiritual life. If you find yourself always filled with mental attitude sins, you need to check your view of the spiritual life. We all have a legacy that will follow us throughout all of eternity and love is a major factor on the nature of that legacy. As we have noted in 1 Cor. 13, love just is the form behind all true virtue, natural or supernatural.

**Psalm 109:1–15.** These curses that fill this psalm are done in the attitude of entreating the justice of God to be executed on evildoers. On the issue of imprecatory psalms, the following is an article that provides some light on this difficult doctrine:

### VENGEANCE AND VINDICATION

Sensitive readers of the Psalms have long been troubled by the harsh expression of vengeance uttered by psalmists, often attributed to David himself. Take for example the statements: “Break the arm of the wicked and evil man: call him to account for his wickedness” (Ps. 10:15); “Let the wicked be put to shame and lie silent in the grave” (Ps. 31:17); “Break the teeth in their mouths. . . . The righteous will be glad when they are avenged, when they bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked” (Ps. 58:6–10). Such unloving statements raise serious ethical questions about the vindictive spirit reflected in these statements. Other prominent curses are found in Psalms 3:7; 5:10; 28:4; 35; 40:14–15; 55; 69; 79; 109; 137; 139:19–22; 140:9–10. Attempts to explain such fierce expressions fall into several categories. First, some think that these curses only reflect the humanity of the author expressing his deepest desires for vindication when wronged by the wicked. Thus, he was reflecting a lower standard of morality than that found in the New Testament. This explanation does not adequately account for the fact that the verses in which these curses occur are inspired by the very God who taught the virtue of turning the other cheek. We must also recognize that 1 Samuel portrays David in a very different light. Although provoked almost beyond imagination, David did not respond vengefully but by tolerance and patience. The occasions on which David refused to kill his mortal enemy Saul provide eloquent testimony to this. Furthermore, Leviticus 19:18 forbids any attempt to exact vengeance against personal enemies, arguing against interpreting these curses as personal vendettas.

Second, another explanation sees the curses as only predictions of the enemy’s ruin rather than as expressions of the psalmist’s desire that the enemy meet an unhappy end. But Psalm 59 is clearly a prayer to God in which the psalmist asks God to wreak havoc on his enemies.

A plausible understanding of these difficult sayings must take account of the significant role enemies play in the Book of Psalms. Their presence goes far beyond the relatively limited number of psalms that curse the psalmist’s enemies. The psalmists were often kings or represented the king in some official capacity. God mandated Israel’s king to rule over God’s covenant people in order to safeguard them and all God had promised to do through them.

Thus, any threat to God’s people was also a threat to the very promise of God. In this unique situation, to oppose the God-anointed king was to oppose God Himself. So the king/psalmist prayed that God would judge those evildoers who intended to hinder the work of God, desiring that God and His work on earth would be vindicated.

Because of the unique position held by the king as God’s anointed, he represented God’s will in a measure unlike that of anyone today. For this reason believers today must not pray curses, for they are not in a position like that of the king/psalmist in ancient Israel.

*Romans 11:36 For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen.*

*Pastor Don*