

God's call to defend it (Nehemiah 4)

Faith in hard times

What does faith look like in hard times? For Nehemiah, it was holding work tools in one hand and a weapon in the other as they built the wall under constant threat of attack.

Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other, and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked. (Neh 4:17-18). Like the people of Judah defending the city of Jerusalem, there are times of national threat and emergency, when a population is called to defend its land against an aggressor. But what about the Church, how should it respond to threat and persecution?

The biblical scholar Hugh Williamson, picking up on verse 4-5 says of Nehemiah's prayer 'the sentiments that he expressed have been superseded for the Christian.' Though Nehemiah expresses what is perfectly natural to humans, to call for the destruction of our enemies, Jesus leads us in a new direction. ⁴³ 'You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbour and hate your enemy." ⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (Matthew 5:43-45)

There will always be times where we, Christians, are disliked. There are many places around the world where we are persecuted for following Jesus. I heard it said of one Christian recently that they lived with 'open hands and an undefended heart.' I felt this echoed the life of Jesus, he defended humanity, winning our salvation by becoming defenceless in the face of human aggression.

In a book called the Prayers of the Reformers, the prayers allow us into the mind and heart of some of these world changers. Jan Hus has two prayers within the book, he took issue with some of the practice and teaching of the main church of his day at the turn of the 14th and 15th century. Sadly, Hus was betrayed after being assured of safe passage to plead his case, he was condemned a heretic and burned at the stake.

At some point in his life, he wrote this prayer reflecting on Luke 23:34.

Lord Jesus Christ, I commit my soul into your hands,

for you have redeemed me with your blood.

Father in heaven, do not hold against my enemies the sins they commit against me; rather, let me know that they will be at peace in your presence.

O Holy Spirit, enlighten their hearts,

so that the truth of the Gospel may open their eyes,

and its praise may be spread everywhere,

Forever and ever. Amen. (Jan Hus)

Like Nehemiah we are called to defend, but not bricks and mortar, rather people. The model that Jesus offers is one of love and sacrifice, and follow Hus' prayer with a desire for the best even for our enemies.

Questions for connect groups

1. We can all feel like Nehemiah at times (Neh 4:4-5), and rightly so, but what helps us change the way we feel?
2. Have you ever loved an enemy, if so, what helped you to do that?
3. Jan Hus didn't agree with his enemies in fact he was very vocal against them, nevertheless he prayed that they would be 'at peace in your presence'. How might we 'really' pray for our enemies?