



“Facing Opposition”
Nehemiah 4

Idea: God uses opposition as a teaching tool to provide an opportunity for you to learn to trust Him more.

Intro: Samantha had recently moved to town from a southern state. This was the third week in her new middle school. Samantha had been doing her best to meet other students in her classes and develop some friendships, but she struggled with shyness and didn't seem to fit in many of the social circles. Samantha's family didn't have a lot of money, so the clothes she wore were not name brand. She didn't dress in the latest styles. There had been several days in her first three weeks at school, where she ate lunch by herself. Some of the students had even begun to pick on her. They called her names and made fun of the way she talked. Their words really hurt Samantha. She wanted to move back to her old town and to her old friends. More and more, each morning, she began to dread going to school.

We have all probably heard that ageless childhood rhyme, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.”

Wrong! It may sound like a good, sound statement to the one being ridiculed, but the truth is those words cut like a knife deep into the person's heart. It is wrong because words have such a profound effect that we devise defenses against them. If words truly did not matter, we would not bother denying their power. But words can carry destruction or security, trust or suspicion. They can exonerate or condemn, bring hope or despair, truth or deceit, hatred or kindness, and clarity or confusion. Words can cut into our spirits like no other weapon and leave scars for a lifetime; they can also linger through the years, offering inspiration and confidence.

When Nehemiah and the Jews were working on the wall around Jerusalem, Sanballat and Tobiah launched a war of words. They hurled insults, ridicule, taunts, and threats in the hope that these words would demoralize the people. Rumors of attack were more unsettling to the Jews than the actuality might have been. Guards were posted on the wall, but the gossip and derision assaulted the minds of the people.

Nehemiah, however, kept the people focused on the work before them. More importantly, he encouraged the people by reminding them of the great and awesome God they served (4:14).

Read Nehemiah 4:1-23.

Inquiry: Just like anyone, the Jews, who heard the vision God had given Nehemiah to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, would have preferred for the work to be embraced and celebrated by everyone. They didn't want to face opposition on any level. In fact they probably would have loved for an angelic construction team to come down from heaven and do the work. But that is not how God works with and develops His people.

Therefore, it is important for believers to understand how God works. The Bible teaches that salvation is a total work of God in the believer as He resurrects the dead spirit within him or her (Eph 2:4). He is the One who calls, romances, and enables the

individual to say yes to the gospel. Sanctification, though, is a work shared by both the Lord and the believer (Rom 6:19; 2 Thess 2:13). God uses His Word and the circumstances of life to develop and shape the believer into the image of Christ. It is a process, an ongoing process, in the life of the believer. And we see in the Bible that God uses opposition as a teaching tool to provide an opportunity for you to learn to trust Him more.

James, the half-brother of Jesus, understood what great teaching tools adversity and opposition are for the believer.

2 Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, 3 for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. 4 And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

– James 1:2-4

James didn't say, "*If you meet trials of various kinds.*" He said, "*When you meet trials.*" It has been said that in life you are either in a storm, have just come out of a storm, or heading into a storm. In other words, facing opposition is a natural and normal part of living in this fallen world. There are two components to the opposition. The first involves the people or circumstances that are actively opposing you. For Nehemiah this was Sanballat, Tobiah, and the surrounding peoples. The second involves God who is allowing the opposition. The Lord could easily have removed any and all opposition from Nehemiah's project, but He did not. He allowed them to stay, to ridicule, to threaten, and to organize. To what end did God allow the opposition? The purpose was to test, to teach, and to train them. The same is true for you and I today. Our God allows and even causes opposition in our lives in order to test, to teach, and to train us in godliness. What is it that we need to learn in facing opposition?

1. When you are engaged in the work of the Lord, opposition is to be expected. (vs. 1-3, 7-8)

As the work gets under way, the leader is bombarded with trouble from every angle. Initially, trouble comes from outside the ranks. That ole-menacing duo resumes their opposition. Sanballat was greatly displeased in chapter 2 when Nehemiah arrived and began talking about rebuilding the walls. Then, as the work on the walls began, Sanballat becomes *angry* and *greatly enraged* (4:1). Before long, his friend Tobiah joins his ridicule of the Jews (4:3). Their verbal onslaughts are shared by the surrounding peoples and followed by threatening plots to fight against Jerusalem and cause confusion (4:8).

Sanballat and Tobiah's plan began to work. In verse 10 we learn that the people became discouraged by the immensity of the work. They looked at all the rubble and surmised that it was too much for them. They also began to listen to the rumors of the impending attack (4:11). The men who lived outside of Jerusalem feared for their families (4:12). The trouble Nehemiah faced began on the outside, but it quickly moved inward as the people became gripped by fear.

What happened to the Jews and the opposition we face today should not surprise us. Most work for God thrusts you into the arena of conflict. There is a spiritual battle being waged. The enemy is always on the alert, ready to destroy any undertaking, which might glorify God and help others. Nehemiah sought to glorify God and help the people of Jerusalem. Sanballat cared nothing for Israel's God and wanted to keep the Jews under his foot.

Appl: Any time you are seeking to carry out God's work, you are embarking on a spiritual journey with mountaintops and valleys, beautiful meadows and perilous cliffs. The journey will have its fair share of danger and doubt. The enemy will war against you with threats and assaults. He will seek to confuse and

discourage. His opposition should be expected. Likewise, God's allowance of the opposition should be expected. He is using it to grow your faith.

2. When you are in the midst of opposition, God can be trusted. (vs. 4-5, 9a, 14)

Nehemiah's response to the enemy's assaults was to turn to God. He leaned in rather than pulled away. So many people flee when adversity comes. They give up on God and His plan for their life. Not so with Nehemiah. His response was to hurry into the audience chamber of God. In 2:20 he boldly declared to the mockers his conviction that the God of heaven would grant success to them. His conviction, though, had to become more than an inspiring rallying cry; heaven's Lord must be sought for earth's needs.

Nehemiah believed that God could be trusted in the midst of the storm, so he prayed. Raymond Brown identifies four characteristics of Nehemiah's prayer to God.

- 1) He prayed honestly.
Nehemiah was angry about their ridicule. He couldn't contain his fury, so the exasperation spilled over into fervent prayer. There was no need to choose his words carefully or cloak them in religious language because God knew the reason for his indignation.

As you walk with God, there will be times when bewilderment and stress will cause you to cry out in anguish and even frustration toward God. When you are suffering or it seems as if heaven is silent, it is quite okay to be honest with God. He can take it. It is better to express your pain in the holy place than harbor resentment and begin to scoff at prayer.

2) He prayed passionately.

Nehemiah's prayer is an unbridled expression of turbulent emotions. He can't conceal his fury.

He has been attacked personally, the Jews ridiculed, but more importantly his enemies have stood against God and His work.

Therefore, he called on the Lord to do to them what had been done to Israel. He called for their sins to never be removed. Basically, he prayed that Sanballat, Tobiah, and the others would go to hell.

Nehemiah's prayer doesn't sound very Christian. It is important to understand that he didn't have the full revelation of God as we do today. Christians react to cruelty and injustice in the light of two great biblical events that Nehemiah didn't have – the death of Christ and the return of Christ.

Commenting on this type of angry prayer in psalmody, Derek Kidner says that to understand such prayers, "...we should have to suspend our consciousness of having a gospel to impart (which affects our attitude to fellow-sinners) and our assurance of a final righting of wrongs (which affects our attitude to present anomalies). Without these certainties, only a cynic could feel no impatience to see justice triumphant and evil men broken."

3) He prayed realistically.

It would be a mistake to dismiss Nehemiah's prayer as an expression of uncontrolled anger.

Nehemiah was furious because Sanballat's insults were an offence against God. He worked to thwart the plan of God. Therefore, Nehemiah was jealous for the honor of God. His cry for

vengeance was a cry for justice, and the Bible teaches that there is a place for righteous anger (Eph 4:26).

C. S. Lewis observed that in some circumstances, “the absence of anger is a most alarming symptom and the presence of indignation may be a good one. For if we look at their railings we find they are usually angry not simply because these things have been done to them but because these things are manifestly wrong, are hateful to God as well as to the victim.”

Jesus was angry at times. Therefore, in the right context the anger needs to be expressed. It must not be turned inward and bottled up. Anger that is allowed to fester can damage you. When anger is not handled correctly the offended person can become an offender.

Nehemiah’s prayer is descriptive rather than prescriptive. He didn’t sugarcoat the situation. He was realistic about the opposition.

- 4) He prayed dependently.
Hear, O God... This is the cry of a desperate man. Nehemiah knew that the trouble was more than he could handle. Only God could give them the strength and resolve needed to stand against the opposition. His prayer and dependence inspired the other Jews to pray in verse 9.

When the storm is raging and you find yourself in them midst of opposition, lean into God. Don’t cut and run. Don’t give up. God can be trusted.

3. When you are struggling against opposition, keep moving forward. (vs. 6, 9b, 14-23)

Sanballat and Tobiah were bullies. They worked together to bully Nehemiah into stopping the work. It started with mockings, moved to threats, and culminated with militias being formed. Jerusalem was literally surrounded by their enemies. Samaria was gathered to the north, the Arabs to the south, the Ammonites to the east, and the Ashdodites to the west. The rumor mill was churning. There were all kinds of talk about being attacked and defeated. The Jews in Jerusalem were scared and discouraged. The bully seemed to be winning.

What do you do with a bully? You punch him in the nose. You keep moving forward. Nehemiah didn't challenge Sanballat to a UFC match, but he did give him over to the Lord for a title match. Rather than giving into the pressure from the bullies, Nehemiah led the people to keep moving forward in the work of God. In verse 6 we see that they kept building the wall. Then in verse 9, when further threats came, they kept building the wall. They stationed some men to fight and others to work. They armed themselves at work. Nothing was going to deter them from moving forward in the work.

We need the same tenacity in our commitment to the Lord and His work today. Nothing will keep us from carrying out the mission.

Conclusion: We must remember that opposition will always be present as long as we are seeking to glorify God and carry out His mission in our lives and church. God allows and uses it to test, teach and train us in our faith. He is a big God and a good Father. He can be trusted when life becomes difficult, so keep moving forward in His plan and work for your lives.

The great reformer Martin Luther used to say, “Work as if it all depends on you; pray as if it all depends on God.” The life of faith is a cooperative effort, *“for we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them”* (Eph 2:10).

In this life we will face opposition. It will come in many forms from the enemy, but remember that has been signed off on by our good God. The purpose of the opposition we face in life is to teach us to trust God more. It is His way of getting you up on your toes, prepared to fight and defend what matters most to you. But it all depends on how you handle it. It will cause you to see your smallness in the face of your opposition, or it will cause you to see God’s greatness in the face of your opposition. Keep your eyes on God’s greatness, lean in to Him, and move forward.