

“Opposition”
Nehemiah 4:1-23
Nehemiah: Rebuilding a City & People for God
Mercy Hill Church | April 30, 2023

Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews. ² 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?” ³ Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, “Yes, what they are building—if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall!” ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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. ⁶ So we built the wall. And all the wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work. ⁷ But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites 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. ⁸ And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it. ⁹ And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night. ¹⁰ 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.” ¹¹ And our enemies said, “They will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work.” ¹² At that time the Jews who lived near them came from all directions and said to us ten times, “You must return to us.” ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ 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.” ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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, ¹⁷ who were building on the wall. Those who carried burdens were loaded in such a way that each labored on the work with one hand and held his weapon with the other. ¹⁸ And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built. The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ In the place where you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us.” ²¹ So we labored at the work, and half of them held the spears from the break of dawn until the stars came out. ²² 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 labor by day.” ²³ 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

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Summary of Nehemiah chapters 1-3:

- Nehemiah 1: “Conviction” – Nehemiah’s conviction for God’s purposes leads him to pray in response to the dire circumstance of God’s city (Jerusalem) and God’s people even though Nehemiah is nearly a thousand miles away from Jerusalem in Susa.
- Nehemiah 2:1-8: “Mission” – Nehemiah’s conviction becomes a clear mission through prayer, planning, and steps of faith under God’s sovereignty while serving as the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes of Persia.
- Nehemiah 2:9-20: “Preparation” – Before actual rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, Nehemiah personally inspects and evaluates the task at hand. Subsequently, Nehemiah calls God’s people to rebuild the walls together for God’s glory – despite rising opposition from Sanballat and others.
- Nehemiah 3: “Construction” – Presented is the list of names of all who helped rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Beyond this list of names, we see the unity and diversity of God’s people, the availability and adaptability of God’s people, and the heart and humility of God’s people.

Introduction

- Consider a time when you faced difficulty or opposition. How did you react or respond? Why?

1. **Verbal Opposition (vv.1-3, 4-5)**

- Sanballat (governor of Samaria, from town of Horon ~12 miles northwest of Jerusalem – name means “Sin – Sumerian moon god – has begotten”) & Tobiah (Ammonite) continue their verbal opposition to Nehemiah’s rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. Their original words didn’t deter Nehemiah (cf. Nehemiah 2:19), so they take it to another level in their verbal deterrent.
- Not just Sanballat, but his kinsmen and the army of Samaria (much like how a bully enjoys a crowd behind him) – along with Tobiah as well.
 - Sanballat’s animosity towards the Jewish people motivate by different reason – racial, religious and/or political.
- Instead of accusations or statements, Sanballat’s verbal attacks are in the form of (5) questions – questions meant to provoke, mock, ridicule, discourage, and demoralize Nehemiah and company from rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.
 - Tobiah’s comments are meant to just add insult to injury (v.3) as he questions the structural integrity of the walls.

2. **Physical Opposition (vv.7-8, 9)**

- As the verbal attacks prove to be ineffective as the Jewish people continue rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem and the gaps between the walls are starting to be filled, Sanballat and Tobiah gather their crew (Arabs, Ammonites, Ashodites – essentially surrounding Jerusalem from all sides) and escalate their opposition from verbal to physical (v.8 – “fight” and “cause confusion” -- literally ‘wandering’ or ‘error,’ v.11 – “kill them”)
- However, the threat of physical attack isn’t a direct siege but rather a surprise attack (v.11 – “They will not know or see till we come among them...”) – possibly did not want to draw the attention or ire of King Artaxerxes?
 - Sun Tzu, the great Chinese military general, strategist and philosopher, once said: “Attack him where he is unprepared, appear where you are unexpected...in conflict, direct confrontation will lead to engagement, and surprise will lead to victory.”

3. **Internal Opposition (vv.10-12, 13-14)**

- However, Nehemiah and the builders didn’t just face verbal opposition and the threat of physical opposition, they also faced internal opposition in 2 ways:
 - 1) Internal Doubt (v.11): 3 statements which reveal the (possible) effects of the verbal/physical opposition:
 - Tired – “The strength of those who bear the burdens is failing...”
 - Overwhelmed – “There is too much rubble...”
 - Alone – “By ourselves we will not be able to rebuild the wall...”
 - The thought that rebuilding the wall isn’t possible anymore – perhaps time to quit?
 - 2) Internal Dissension (v.12): Those builders from came from areas nearby were being encouraged to cease rebuilding and go back home and/or they wanted protection from the threat of attacks. Their focus became more on self-preservation than the rebuilding of the walls in the face of opposition.
- As Nehemiah and the people God faced wave after wave of opposition in different forms: verbal, physical and internal, how did they respond to each of these waves?

2 Disclaimers:

- **Expectation(s):** What are our expectations when it comes to difficulties, challenges, and oppositions?
 - Broadly speaking, we live in a sinful, fallen, broken world – we should expect difficulties in this life. But what about the people of God? Does Scripture promise no hardships, challenges, opposition, or persecution?
 - The story of the Bible is filled with challenges, difficulties, opposition and even persecution of God’s people.
 - Jesus forewarns and teaches that we should expect difficulties, challenges, opposition and even persecution on account of our faith (cf. Matthew 5:10-12, 44; John 15:19-21, 16:33) – as does the apostle Paul (cf. Ephesians 6:10-11).
 - As Christians, we should expect difficulties, challenges, opposition as we live out our faith in following Jesus.
- **Perception(s)**
 - We need to be wise and humble in perceiving (discerning) the difficulties, opposition, or even “persecution” we encounter in our lives.
 - We ought to be mindful that...
 - The opposition we face for our faith is actually very minor to those that our global brothers and sisters in Christ face
 - Perhaps the difficulties we face is not due to our faith in Jesus – but rather the consequences of our own sin, folly or foolishness.
 - We don’t become “false martyrs” for something other than the Gospel (i.e. our own agendas under the guise of the Gospel) (cf. Luke 10:29, 16:14-15, Genesis 3:12-13)

4. **Response: Persevere in Christ! (vv.4-6, 9, 13-23)**

- They didn’t give up – they didn’t stop rebuilding the wall. They persevered! Why? How?
- **Together:** For and With One Another (v.9, 15-23)
 - Nehemiah and the people of God responded to these waves of opposition by preserving together – for one another and with one another – in rebuilding the wall together
 - v.6 – “we rebuilt the wall...for the people had a mind to work”
 - v.9 – “we prayed...”
 - vv.13-23 – Nehemiah set up guards and stationed people in the gaps in the walls (v.13), exhorts them to fight for one another (v.14b), worked together – whether rebuilding the wall or standing guard (v.16) – or rallying to potential attacks (v.20)
- **Prayer:** (vv.4-5, 9, 14)
 - With each wave of opposition, Nehemiah and the people of God turned to the Lord (in prayer) – beyond their limits and their abilities.
 - Responded to verbal opposition (vv.1-3) with prayer (vv.4-5) (cf. Jeremiah 18:23, Revelation 6:10)
 - Responded to physical opposition (vv.7-8) with prayer (v.9)
 - Responded to internal opposition (vv.10-12) by turning their attention back to the Lord (vv.14-15) – being reminded of God’s purpose, presence, power (His sovereignty)! Rebuilding the wall for God’s glory!
 - **Example:** Grit: #1 NY Times Bestseller The Power of Passion and Perseverance by Angela Duckworth
 - Secret to outstanding achievement is not talent but a special blend of passion and persistence she calls ‘grit.’ Part 2: Growing Grit From The Inside Out (4 parts):

- 3. Purpose – “idea of purpose is the idea that what we do matters to people other than ourselves.”
 - In study on grit, while gritty people did value pleasure (what feels good, comfortable, etc.) – consistent with less gritty people -- their values on purpose were significantly higher.
- 4. Hope – “Grit depends on...the expectation that our own efforts can improve our future. *I have a feeling tomorrow will be better* is different than *I resolve to make tomorrow better.*”
 - Prayer is turning to the Lord – knowing and believing that we can’t do it – we can’t handle it! The beginning of the Christian life starts not a list of our accomplishments and accolades but with a desperate cry (prayer) out to Jesus – Forgive me! Save me!
 - It’s about God’s sovereignty, God’s power, God’s work!
- **Action (vv.9, 13)**
 - Lastly, they persevered by taking action – not a passive perseverance but an active one. Nehemiah and the people of God responded to the waves of opposition not only by setting their eyes and hearts on the Lord (through prayer) but also in taking appropriate actions! (cf. James 2:14-26). Even as they prayed to God asking Him to rescue them, they took action, ownership – and acknowledged God’s work (v.15)

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Christ Connection

- Sometimes we may wonder or feel alone in the midst of difficulties – know this morning that Jesus understands! As we consider the life and ministry of Jesus, he constantly and continually encountered opposition (cf. Mark 2:6, 16, 24, 3:22) – whether concerning His actions, His teachings or even who He was/is (re: Son of God). He was falsely accused and mocked and ridiculed on the cross – and ultimately died on the cross for your sins. And amazingly, even as He hung on the cross, as He looked at those who nailed his hands and his feet, at those who mocked and ridiculed Him, those who opposed Him, he said and prayed, “Father forgive them for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).
- But also know that Jesus reminds us in John 15:19-21 that just as He was persecuted, so we as His disciples will be – to expect it, not be surprise by it -- as we worship and follow Him, in this world and life. But we do so with hope knowing that God is with us and for us – and that He is sovereign and able to use and turn difficult situations into something good and beautiful like He did with the cross – and like he did with Nehemiah and those who rebuilt the walls.
- Facing opposition is a conduit for us to live the cross-centered life. 2 Corinthians 12:9–10 But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong” – that we would experience and know more of Christ’s power as we persevere!
 - 1 Peter 5:9–10 Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.

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Reflection Questions

- What is your typical reaction (or feeling) when difficulties arise in your life? How and why do you tend to respond in these ways?
- In what ways have you faced opposition due to your faith? Conversely, in what ways have you faced difficulties as a consequence of your sin?
- Which of the following have you turned to when it comes to persevering: community, prayer, and taking action? Which is an area of possible growth that you need to keep in mind?
- How does knowing and remembering Jesus encourage and empower you to persevere in your journey of faith?