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Church

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Overcoming Inevitable Opposition

Nehemiah 4:1–23

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series: Nehemiah: Rebuilding Your Broken World

Many of you know that I came to the Bay Area from Wisconsin. We still have a little cottage in North West, Wisconsin on a very nice lake named Long Lake. We don't use the cabin as much as we used to, but it's still there and I think it will always be there for our family.

The 4th of July is a special time on Long Lake. Cabins are full. The lake is packed with water skiers, jet skiers, pontoon boats, tubers, a few poor people trying to fish amongst all the horse power on the lake. At noon on the 4th there is a boat parade. Everyone decorates their boats and convoys around the lake. Then the grills fire up, and it's time for brats, beer and cheese curds. As dusk approaches, people jump back into their boats and journey to the larger lower bay for fireworks. On Long Lake fireworks are not a city funded event. It's paid for and put on by one man. A guy named Larry pulls out all the stops and puts on one of the best fireworks shows around. Larry and his team fire them from his property out over the lake and everyone watches the show while anchored in their boats. Well, you might wonder, that must be an expensive show for one guy to pay for. It was. But Larry isn't just Larry. He is comedian Larry the Cable Guy, and he married a local gal and they bought a vacation "cabin" on the lake, and he does this for the folks every year.

It's Americana for sure. It's fun, it's family, it's boats, it's noodle salad. It's care-free. We always threw a party at our cabin, and I would spend most of the day hauling skiers and tubers and wake boarders around the lake. It's one of our favorite times with family and friends. It is a good time. It is a good thing. It's freedom. It's living a dream. You feel free in so many ways on Long Lake on the 4th of July. It's a beautiful picture of celebration.

It's right for me to remember that I didn't do anything to earn those privileges of experiencing freedom on Long Lake. They are gifts that others gave through sacrifice. Many brave men and women died over the course of our nation's history to insure these rights and freedoms stay in tact.

Now I want to put another picture in your mind. It's not a picture of celebration. It's a picture of sacrifice. In February 1945, after a series of bloody battles in the South Pacific, Americans continued to advance closer to Japan and to an ultimate end of World War II. The strategy to win the war was to island hop close enough to the mainland of Japan that our Air Force could reach Japan with bombers and hit targets that would end the war sooner. The island was Iwo Jima and it was 650 miles from the heart of the enemy. The 5 mile wide island was shaped like a pork chop, reeked of sulphur, and was defended by 30,000 enemy forces. The island was to be taken by the United States Marines. The navy bombed the island for two solid weeks to

soften defenses. In fact the Navy commanders thought the pre-invasion bombing was so severe that the island would be taken in just 3 days. So American Marines landed thinking the opposition would be light. It was a rude awakening. There was a 500 foot mountain on that island and the marines knew that they would eventually have to capture their enemy dug into that mountain. Every fighting man on that island could look up and see Mt. Suribachi. One day, they looked up and saw something else. They saw a flag flying on the top of the mountain.

Five marines raised this flag, and photographer Joe Rosenthal pulled out his camera and clicked this photograph. In our language the photo went viral. This picture became the most reproduced photograph in the history of photography. In the midst of that bloody battle, for the Marines to look up and see their flag atop Suribachi, it rallied the tired, frustrated and fearful troops.

Even after the flag was raised the fighting remained fierce on Iwo Jima. In fact three of the American marines who raised the flag were killed. The Battle of Iwo Jima lasted didn't last 3 days. It lasted 36 days at the great cost of 26,000 American casualties.

These heroes fought tyranny and injustice. They fought to preserve for freedoms we enjoy today, the freedom to disagree with what someone else says, thinks or believes. They fought to preserve the freedom to assemble which is what we are doing right now. They fought to preserve the freedom to express our religious faith without fear of persecution, which our founders so strongly put forth in our Bill of Rights.

The marines on Iwo Jima were surprised at the level of opposition they faced, and they were discouraged, but they were reminded—and an entire nation was reminded by the flag on top of Suribachi—that they were fighting for something good. Something right. Something special.

This lesson is also found in Nehemiah chapter 4. Opposition will always be close to those who are doing good. For Nehemiah and the people in Jerusalem, they soon discovered that the good work of rebuilding the wall around their beloved city of Jerusalem was not popular with everyone around them.

And the spiritual principle that lifts off the page is this: Anyone who is committed to rebuilding their broken world can expect stiff opposition from enemies. Whether it is something broken in your inner world—some sin, some addiction, some bad attitude, some broken relationship—you can expect opposition. Or whether it is some injustice in your outer world—some unfairness or some abuse that God has you fighting—you can expect opposition. ***"Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal***

that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you” (1 Peter 4:12).

Nehemiah helps us understand this, and then equips us to face this opposition. Turn in your Bibles to Nehemiah chapter 4.

When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews, and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said, “What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble—burned as they are?” (verses 1–2).

Opposition Through Ridicule

So opposition picks up. Why? Because the wall was actually getting rebuilt. From a pipe dream to reality. It was happening and it was a threat to Nehemiah's enemies. This is the third time we hear about Sanballat. Every time we read about him, he was standing in opposition to the work of God. Sanballat didn't follow God. He was a Samaritan and was governor of a city eight miles north of Jerusalem called Beth Horon. Since Jerusalem was in rubble, traders who came and went through the region traded with Sanballat in his city. He didn't want Jerusalem to be rebuilt because if Jerusalem became powerful again, he would lose a lot of trade and money.

So Sanballat stood before his entire army and pointed a finger at the Jews over the hill and he called them feeble. He taunted them with questions. How could this remnant of Jews build a wall that could hold back our army? I could picture his army bursting out in laughter. Will they offer sacrifices? Sanballat is saying, “Look at these religious fools, it will take more than prayer and worship to rebuild a city. Will they finish in a day? Can they bring these stones back to life? Their building materials were old and damaged, they couldn't possibly be used to make a strong wall.”

Not all opposition we face is from the devil. This was. They were insulting the work of God. They were insulting the servants of God. We think about how the giant Goliath ridiculed the young shepherd boy David. We think about the soldiers who mocked Jesus during his trial, and the crowd who taunted him while he was hanging on a cross. Then one of Sanballat's cronies, Tobiah, jumped in with a joke.

Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, “What they are building—even a fox climbing up on it would break down their wall of stones!” (v. 3).

A fox is about the size of a cocker spaniel. It was quite an insult. But Tobiah made one crucial mistake when he assessed the stone wall. It wasn't the Jews' stone wall. God designed the wall. Just as Jesus said, **“I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not overpower it”** (Mt. 16:18), this wall was God's project. He made Nehemiah the General Contractor. These critics didn't realize it, but they were aiming their criticisms at the project owner—God. And Nehemiah faces the ridicule squarely and responds with prayer.

Nehemiah's Response: Prayer

Hear us, our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. Do not cover up their guilt or blot out

their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders. So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart (verses 4–6).

This prayer wasn't for the strength to turn the other cheek. This prayer was to smack them in both cheeks, Lord. Beat the stuffing out of them, Heavenly Father. It was an honest and angry prayer. Nehemiah knew these enemies were really fighting against God so he asks God to deal with them. But as CS Lewis said, “When God is mocked, it ought to make us angry.” There should be some things that get us hot and bothered. So we see that Nehemiah got his anger out at the sin. But we must remember, there is always room for repentance for anyone who opposes God. The apostle Paul tells us that before we accepted Christ as our Savior we were just like Sanballat. We were opposed to God. Before Christ we all, according to Paul, opposed God.

After praying, Nehemiah's anger seems to recede. He turns from his critics and back to the work, back to his task, back to what God had called him to, and they worked with all their heart. And because of that, the opposition intensified.

Opposition Through Threat

But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the people of Ashdod heard that the repairs to Jerusalem's walls had gone ahead and that the gaps were being closed, they were very angry. They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it (verses 7–8).

Sanballat and his cronies went from ridiculing to outright threatening. They united to attack. It's interesting that in my experience it's a challenge to get God's people working together, but the world doesn't have much of a problem uniting against God's people. God's people were surrounded. You had Samaritans to the north, the people of Ashdod to the west, Tobiah and his Ammonites on the east, and Arabs to the south. The workers were surrounded and afraid. Whenever God calls people to “arise and rebuild your broken world,” Satan says, “Let me arise and oppose.” In his famous hymn *A Mighty Fortress* Martin Luther warns us, “For still our ancient foe, doth seek to work us woe.”

So what was Nehemiah's response to these elevated threats?

Nehemiah's Response: Prayer and Action

But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat (v. 9).

We see in Nehemiah a common sense leader. He prayed and also took decisive action. I remember as a young Christian I really wanted to date a Christian girl. I went to her apartment to pick her up for a date, and she showed me this ant problem she had. Then she said to me, “I am praying that the ants will go away.” That response about got me to go away. It's great to pray but pass over the can of Raid!

You are afraid your house will be broken into? Pray and lock your door. Out of a job? Pray! But pound the pavement too. Make contacts, get going. I read this week that our Lord has no trouble hitting a moving target. Get moving. If we are in God's will, we will face opposition. It is essential that we face opposition with

prayer. But prayer is not all that is necessary as opposition grows. Let's continue our story and see how God's people respond to the growing threat.

Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, "The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall." Also our enemies said, "Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work." Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, "Wherever you turn, they will attack us" (verses 10–12).

Simply put, the workers were tired. The idea of giving out is "staggering, tottering, and stumbling." When you are tired it is easy to become discouraged. They had celebrated that they were half done with the walls, but reality hit them; we have another half to go. Not only were they tired, there were all these broken rocks, dirt, dried up mortar, and junk everywhere. It was frustrating. How are we going to get this wall built with all this debris in our way? Think about this picture: Is there so much garbage in our lives we are losing the will to rebuild? The vision that God has given you for change may be getting blurry because of all the debris in your life. I don't know what the rubble is in your life that keeps you from paying attention to your inner world, or attention to rebuilding your outer world... it may be TV, an unhealthy relationship, a sin you have been playing around with too long, something you've been doing in secret that you think no one knows about. This is rubble. It will cause you to stumble, to lose vision to rebuild. Throw it out of the way. Don't get tripped up by it. The broken world you brought up front to pray for, it can be rebuilt. Nehemiah tells us to stop gazing at our rubble and instead gaze at God.

They went from fatigue, to frustration, to fear. They were ready to give up. Their enemy was telling them that there was no way to escape. Their enemy was telling them that they will not rebuild their broken world. Now I don't want to spoil the ending, but I'm going to give it away. The enemy never does attack Jerusalem under Nehemiah's watch. So you see what the enemy does? The enemy lies. The enemy deceives. He uses fatigue, frustration and fear to make us think our broken world could never be rebuilt.

How do we shake it off? As we saw, we shake it off with prayer instead of retaliation. In the next few verses we see some practical help to continue rebuilding when we face real discouragement.

Therefore I stationed some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families, with their swords, spears and bows (v. 13).

Reorganizing Priorities

Remember back in chapter 3, Nehemiah had already organized the people and they had completed half their task. But this new situation, this new threat had come about and it required a change in priorities. Nehemiah saw that if his enemies were going to attack, they were going to attack in the most vulnerable spots. So Nehemiah put guards at all these weak spots to encourage the builders to continue without fear of attack.

Got a problem in your marriage? Reorganize priorities. Don't quit on it. Don't bail on your spouse. Change your approach. Get a new attitude. Get some help. Get a marriage mentor at CPC. Got

a problem in your job? Get a new attitude, a new direction, a new priority. Consider coming to Career Transition Ministry the second Saturday morning of the month at our Foster City Campus. Got a problem with your walk with God? Don't stop following Jesus. Reorganize your schedule this fall to get in a Community Group, Men's Fraternity, Women's Bible Study, MOPS. Get aligned with others who can help you rebuild your broken world.

After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome,... (v. 14a).

Do you know a big reason why we get discouraged? We forget our great and awesome God. In a nutshell: We take our eyes off the Lord! Nehemiah had a special gift of encouragement. He could look at the hard stuff going on around him and then turn and look up to heaven for help. "Remember what the Lord did for us guys. Remember the truth. Let the past be a mirror reflecting into our present. God was faithful in the past. Let that truth reflect back to us in the present and into our future and encourage us."

Remember the Truth

Robert Louis Stevenson told of a ship being tossed by mighty waves. The passengers were very frightened and huddled together deep in the ship. After a while one of the passengers decided to go see the captain. He worked his way up near the pilot's bridge. He could see him through the big window. The captain saw the passenger with fear written all over his face. So, seeing how afraid the man was, the captain threw him a great big grin. The passenger returned to the others in the bottom of the ship and said, "It's okay, we'll be fine. I just saw the captain and he was smiling!" Are you discouraged? Look to heaven and see the grin of Jesus. Keep your eyes on him, not on others. Then Nehemiah goes on to tell them, "Don't be discouraged and give up. There is too much at stake to be discouraged."

"and fight for your families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes" (v. 14b).

Right Fight

We cannot quit! We are not just building walls. We're fighting for our families and all that we hold dear. It's not just brick and mortar, it's flesh and blood. Our fight is about building a better life for our families, a family that will be blessed by your rebuilt life.

My oldest daughter Katie was about to have her 16th birthday party. We talked to a couple of her friends and planned to have a few of her friends over for a surprise party for her birthday in February. We were living in Wisconsin and it happened to be negative 15 degrees the night of her birthday. So 55 of her closest friends crammed into our basement. Then someone brought over a pretty dark and scary movie. There was no way that Julie and I were going to let that kind of movie take place in our house. So upstairs Julie and I talked about it. And we did the awkward but right thing. As the spiritual leader of my home, I sent my wife down to that smelly, moist, teen-filled basement to pull the movie out of the DVR! We fought the right fight for our kids. Later in the evening one of our daughters' friends came

upstairs and said to us, "Mr. and Mrs. Reid, I agree that wasn't a good movie. My parents watch that all the time." I said back to her, "Well, thanks for your support, now go back to the party...."

From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armor. The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah who were building the wall. 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. But the man who sounded the trumpet stayed with me (verses 15–18).

Take Away the Fear Factor

It seems to us reading this that they had to go a lot slower on their building because they had to be extra cautious. Side by side, back to back, always on guard. But in reality it was the perfect balance of faith and action. It's another example that we are better together.

The picture that comes to my mind is a construction shot of the Golden Gate Bridge. The bridge was the longest suspension bridge in the world when it was completed in 1937. But there is an interesting back story. During the first phase of the construction, 23 workmen were lost at sea because they slipped while working on the bridge. Things went from bad to worse because there were very few safety devices available. So when the bridge was halfway completed they decided to change priorities. They reorganized to take away the fear. They built the world's largest safety net and attached it under the area where the men worked. Was it worth the cost or time it took to do this? Ask the 10 men who slipped off the bridge into the net. Ask the hundreds of workmen who built the remainder of the bridge without fear. I read where the net actually sped up work and it was completed in three-fourths the time because the fear factor was removed.

I think some of us are paralyzed to move on rebuilding our broken world. Be encouraged: God's great net of security spans our lives. No matter how broken our world, no matter how discouraged we are, he has stretched himself beneath us. As a result we can live and work without fear, because if we fall he will catch us.

Then I said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "The work is extensive and spread out, and we are widely separated from each other along the wall. Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!" (verses 19–20).

Right Battle Cry

To encourage them further, Nehemiah gives them a battle cry. Remember when you are down, "Our God will fight for us." Remember that. Remember the songs we sing, the scriptures we read. Remember Nehemiah 4:21–23.

So we continued the work with half the men holding spears, from the first light of dawn till the stars came out. At that time I also said to the people, "Have every man and his helper stay inside Jerusalem at night, so

they can serve us as guards by night and as workers by day." Neither I nor my brothers nor my men nor the guards with me took off our clothes; each had his weapon, even when he went for water.

It strikes me as I study this passage that the building project continued to be difficult. It was the right thing, and it was also a real hassle. It says in verses 21–23 that there was still a lot of stress on these people. To avoid discouragement, they prayed. They reorganized priorities, they remembered the truth about God, they remembered what they were fighting for, they worked safely, they united around a battle cry, but it still looked like they were backed in a corner.

I remember a season in my life when I was feeling especially discouraged. I was tired, frustrated and afraid. Building wasn't going forward. There was the enemy and there was a lot of rubble. And I remember a story that spoke to me as I felt backed into a corner. Ken Almer was a preacher of a large church in downtown Los Angeles. He tells the story of two men who are looking at a painting of a chess game. One character in the picture looked like an ordinary man and the other character looked very much like an evil one, a devil. The man, the ordinary looking man, is down to his last piece on the chess board. The only thing he's got left is the king. The title of the painting is Checkmate.

Of these two men looking at the painting, one of them is an international chess champion. He begins to study this painting to the point where he got so engrossed that his friend who was getting impatient asks him what he's doing. The guy says, "There is something about this painting that bothers me. I want to study it for a while."

After a while the chess champion said, "We must locate the man who painted this picture and we must tell him that he either has to change the picture or he has to change the title. I've studied this painting and I have determined that there is something wrong with the painting." "Well what is wrong?" "What's wrong is it's titled 'Checkmate' but the title is wrong. The title misreads the board. In reality the king still has one more move."

It's good to remember that no matter how tired, frustrated or fearful you feel, how backed into a corner you find yourself, the King has one more move. We easily forget. I think that is why he gives us communion. Those who killed Jesus thought it was checkmate. But the king had one more move and he rose from the dead. The world around us seems like checkmate, but don't forget, Jesus Christ has one more move. He will return and make all things right. Read the last page of the story. The King has one more move.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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