



Over the past four weeks we've been looking at God's Word from the Old Testament book of Nehemiah. So far we've seen the following:

- Nehemiah was faced with a problem that broke his heart. The capital city of God—Jerusalem—stood with broken walls and ruined gates. The city was a disgrace and God's reputation was suffering.
- Nehemiah prayed for four months, received a vision from God to go to Jerusalem himself and lead a rebuilding project.
- The people of Jerusalem agreed to Nehemiah's plan to rebuild the wall.
- Last week, in Nehemiah 3, we learned how vitally important every person is in God's work.

Today, as we come to chapter 4, just when everything looked like it was going well, just when God's work was picking up really positive momentum ... Boom! They're hit with opposition. How will they react to insults and teasing? What will they do about men with swords sneaking over to their city to fight them? What does God want to teach us from this chapter? Let's read about it in Nehemiah 4:1–23:

Now it came about that when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became furious and very angry and mocked the Jews. He spoke in the presence of his brothers and the wealthy men of Samaria and said, "What are these feeble Jews doing? Are they going to restore it for themselves? Can they offer sacrifices? Can they finish in a day? Can they revive the stones from the dusty rubble even the burned ones?" Now Tobiah the Ammonite was near him and he said, "Even what they are building—if a fox should jump on it, he would break their stone wall down!"

Hear, O our God, how we are despised! Return their reproach on their own heads and give them up for plunder in a land of captivity. Do not forgive their iniquity and let not their sin be blotted out before You, for they have demoralized the builders.

So we built the wall and the whole wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work.

Now when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repair of the walls of Jerusalem went on, and that the breaches began to be closed, they were very

angry. All of them conspired together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause a disturbance in it.

But we prayed to our God, and because of them we set up a guard against them day and night.

Thus in Judah it was said,

"The strength of the burden bearers is failing,

Yet there is much rubbish;

And we ourselves are unable

To rebuild the wall."

Our enemies said, "They will not know or see until we come among them, kill them and put a stop to the work." When the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times, "They will come up against us from every place where you may turn," then I stationed men in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, the exposed places, and I stationed the people in families with their swords, spears and bows. When I saw their fear, I rose and spoke to the nobles, the officials and 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 houses."

When our enemies heard that it was known to us, and that God had frustrated their plan, then all of us returned to the wall, each one to his work. From that day on, half of my servants carried on the work while half of them held the spears, the shields, the bows and the breastplates; and the captains were behind the whole house of Judah. Those who were rebuilding the wall and those who carried burdens took their load with one hand doing the work and the other holding a weapon. As for the builders, each wore his sword girded at his side as he built, while the trumpeter stood near me. I said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "The work is great and extensive, and we are separated on the wall far from one another. At whatever place you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us."

So we carried on the work with half of them holding spears from dawn until the stars appeared. At that time I also said to the people, "Let each man with his servant spend the night within Jerusalem so that they may be a guard for us by night and a laborer by day." So neither I, my brothers, my

servants, nor the men of the guard who followed me, none of us removed our clothes, each took his weapon even to the water.

This is a tense situation! Insults are flying. Sneak attacks are planned. Counter attacks are planned. Kids are given swords. The people of Jerusalem are losing zeal for this project and they are scared of a sneak attack (you don't give kids swords unless the situation is serious)! Trumpeters are spread out around the wall so they can see everything and call for help. They aren't even bathing for the risk of not being prepared for an attack. But the wall construction does not stop. Nehemiah is unwavering. A little opposition does not discourage him. He tells everyone, "Don't be afraid. Remember our God is great and awesome." He tells everyone, "Our God will fight for us."

What does God want us to learn from these verses? When you're doing something great for God, you will be attacked somehow.

Albert Einstein said, "Great spirits have always encountered violent opposition from mediocre minds." It makes perfect sense then, that God's plans are met with opposition and conflict. His mind is divine and magnificent and every mind of mankind is mediocre in comparison.

Initially, Sanballat ridiculed them in verse 2. He called them "feeble." It means to be withering or fading away. "Can they offer sacrifices?" This was a sarcastic jab at the Jews' faith. What they meant was, "Are these fanatics going to pray the wall up? Are they just going to make the walls grow by their prayers? Bring stones back to life?" That refers to the burned stones. Stones that had been burned were of no use because they were weakened and would crumble. This is probably an exaggeration since only the gates had been burned, not the walls itself. This is an example of how the enemy loves to exaggerate our weaknesses. When these insults didn't stop them from rebuilding the wall, these enemies took things to the next level: they made a plan to fight against them.

This opposition the Israelites are facing is not unique. This is the way opposition works in the life of a Christian too. Every follower of Jesus will experience opposition. Expect it. Don't be surprised by it.

Take for example how Jesus Christ experienced it. At his baptism he hears the voice of God speak, "Here's my son in whom I am pleased." He's about to begin his public ministry of teaching, healing and miracles; that's a good work. He goes to the wilderness to pray and prepare himself for 40 days. That's a spiritual way to approach life. Then what happens? Boom! He's attacked by Satan. Opposition comes his way.

Why? Because Satan wants this world to be as miserable and broken and hopeless as he is. He's pure evil. So it makes sense that when Jesus was preparing to make the largest change in the history of humanity, Satan tried to stop him.

I said a moment ago that a follower of Jesus should expect opposition too. This is why: We are working for and with Jesus. Satan has been opposing Jesus for millennia. We're just the latest followers of his to be brought into the conflict.

When we become a Christian we don't hop on some luxurious cruise ship bound for heaven. It's a lot more like climbing into an army tank at wartime and driving straight through enemy territory. There's a battle going on, and though we may know the ultimate winner, we've got a whole lot of fighting to do in the meantime! It's the spiritual truth that if you identify with Jesus Christ, you will be persecuted.

Here's the beatitude that none of us likes. *"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you"* (Matthew 5:10-12). *"Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted"* (2 Timothy 3:12).

Anne Rice, author of many vampire books, was doing research to write a fictional book about Jesus. She was an atheist and coming to her research of Jesus without much knowledge of who he was. After extensive research, this is what she wrote about her experience:

"Many of these scholars, scholars who apparently devoted their life to New Testament scholarship, disliked Jesus Christ. Some pitied him as a hopeless failure. Others sneered at him, and some felt an outright contempt.

"I'd never come across this kind of emotion in any other field of research. It was puzzling.

"The people who go into Elizabethan studies don't set out to prove that Queen Elizabeth I was a fool. They don't personally dislike her. They don't make snickering remarks about her, or spend their careers trying to pick apart her historical reputation.

"There are New Testament scholars who detest and despise Jesus Christ."

Connecting it together, Satan and the world are opposed to Jesus. Any follower of His will be persecuted and opposed too. The root of the opposition is humanity's opposition to Jesus. Mediocre minds aren't designed to easily accept His grandeur.

This is the first thing God wants us to learn from these verses: When you're doing something great for God, you will be attacked somehow. The second thing is this: What should you do when this happens? Pray and work.

Here's what I mean. In this chapter we see the interplay of God's sovereignty and human responsibility. *"But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat"* (v. 9). We see this same interplay throughout the Bible. For example,

in Isaiah 38 Hezekiah the king is about to die. He prays “Lord, save me.” The Lord said, “OK, I’m going to save you and add 15 years to your life.” Then the Lord said, “Create a plaster of hot figs, place it on your boil and you’ll get better.” The interplay between God’s sovereignty and human responsibility is a theme we’ve been seeing since the beginning of this book.

In our second week of this sermon series I shared a quote that summarizes what we’re learning from Nehemiah. “Pray as though everything depended on God. Work as though everything depended on you” (Saint Augustine). Intellectually, this can be a challenge to wrap our minds around. How God orchestrates the interplay of His sovereignty and our actions is highly mysterious! But in practical living, this is really helpful.

Here’s what I mean: If I really believed my actions and my prayers changed the will of God—like God is a puppet and my prayers move him—I would never pray again. Here’s why. When I was 10 and looked back at my 8-year-old self, I thought my 8-year-old self was an idiot. But when I was 15, I thought my 10-year-old self was a goof ball. And then when I was 20, I thought my 15-year-old self was a jerk. Then when I was 30 looking back at my 20-year-old self, ugh. Guess what, you’re an idiot, goof ball or jerk right now!

Therefore, if I really believe my actions and my prayers literally changed the will of God, I would never pray again. I don’t know what should happen. Don’t give idiots like us that kind of power. That’s reckless and dangerous! On the other hand, if you believe everything is fated and nothing we do makes any difference at all, then you have no incentive to live.

The Bible says what you do matters tremendously. You are responsible. You are important. God will use your actions and your prayers to achieve His plans for His glory. Nehemiah is banking all of his confidence on this. He is unwavering in the face of a little opposition. Nehemiah was sure of what God had said and he was sure of his experience with God while praying.

- God put the vision to rebuild the walls in Nehemiah’s heart as he prayed in chapter 1.
- He knew that *“the gracious hand of my God was on me”* (2:8 and 2:18).
- He is confident that *“The God of heaven will give us success”* (2:20).
- He tells everyone, *“Don’t be afraid. Remember our God is great and awesome ... so fight.”*
- He tells everyone, *“Our God will fight for us.”*

How can we live like this? How can we, God’s church right here in Redwood City, live like this? Expect opposition. Pray and work. One of our great works this summer are our Backyard Bible Camps. Don’t think this will happen without resistance. We are attempting to shine the light of Jesus into the dark hearts of lots

of kids. Then as a culmination of all of our Backyard Bible Camps we’re inviting all of these kids with their families to our worship service on August 23.

We expect opposition and we pray and keep working.

Another of our great works is our Personal Evangelism. Last spring I took 12 people through an Evangelism Training Course. It was an awesome time of praying together and preparing ourselves to winsomely and truthfully learn how to talk about Jesus in an area with a lot of resistance and opposition. The Lord laid this idea on my heart because I kept hearing, over and over again, that people didn’t know how to respond to people’s opposition to talk about spirituality and Jesus.

We had opposition **and** prayer but the work part was confusing. Through our training, each person was better prepared to work. Opposition is still there; prayer is still there; but now the work is being done with greater effectiveness. And some have given their lives to Jesus as a result.

Lastly, one more great work is identifying a new location for our church. Like I shared with you three weeks ago, we believe that God could use us more effectively to make and mature more followers of Christ with a facility to call our own. We are praying about this, we are working, and we are facing and will continue to face opposition to this too.

We know that those who seek to follow Christ will encounter opposition. The Bible is clear about this. As I said before, when we become a Christian we don’t hop on some luxurious cruise ship bound for heaven. It’s a lot more like climbing into an army tank at wartime and driving straight through enemy territory. There’s a spiritual battle going on, and though we may know the ultimate winner, we’re drafted into Jesus’ army.

This might sound a bit aggressive or dangerous to some of you. Some days, I admit, I’d like my life to just be happy and easy. I don’t want opposition or persecution. Who does? Yet we must keep in mind that opposition and persecution always come when people are working to accomplish something great.

As we work with Jesus, we are working to accomplish the greatest transformation possible. We are working and praying to bring spiritual life to dead souls. We are working and praying to bring spiritual growth in a world that has almost always stood opposed to God.

How are you responding to opposition? If you need some inspiration and encouragement this morning, Jesus is ready to meet you and fill you with His power.

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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