

## OVERCOMING OPPOSITION

### Nehemiah 4

One of the greatest feats of engineering is the Panama Canal. In the late 1800s the French began the Canal but abandoned the project because of the difficulties. When Roosevelt became President, he decided to take action. He bought the rights for some \$50,000,000 and dispatched those who would undertake the work.

It was built with great difficulty and cost. Mountains were moved. Landslides hampered the work. Disease-carrying mosquitoes were so thick that workers complained that you would get a mouthful with every breath. 500 lives were lost for every mile of the canal.

Vociferous critics began to assail the project. Someone asked the Commander, Col. George W. Goethals, how he would answer his critics. His simple reply--"With time and the canal." Ten years and almost \$400,000,000 later, the answer was unveiled when the first ship slipped through the canal.

Those who would accomplish much will face difficulty and criticism. Nehemiah was such a man. He set about, under God's direction, to rebuild the ruined walls of Jerusalem. How did he handle his hecklers? With time and the wall.

This week, we continue our study in "Time to Build". We're on the sixth part of this series. I've entitled this message, "Overcoming Opposition" and we're looking at how to build and rebuild our lives in the midst of the pandemic and after the pandemic. For we know that this too shall pass and we have to be ready when that time comes. So, we're learning from the greatest builder in the Bible, a man named Nehemiah.

You know, there will be people who don't understand what you're trying to do and what you're attempting to do, or how you expect to do it in building a better life. But even if they do understand it, there will still be many people who will oppose you, and that's what we're going to look at this week.

Now, we face a lot of opportunities in life. We grab those opportunities and then we find out later that there is opposition. That's why many of us don't grab opportunities anymore. We don't want to take risks. But opposition seems to be a part of opportunity. It comes with the turf. Paul himself recognized this in 1 Corinthians 16:9. He says it like this: *“There is a wide-open door for a great work here (in other words, there is great opportunity), although many oppose me.”*

So, you see, those two things, opportunity and opposition go together. And if you're going to build a better life, if you're going to make something of your life, not everybody's going to like it, not everybody's going to agree with it. And in the same way, whatever your dream is, whatever your goal is, whatever your ministry objective is, whatever vision you have for the future, for building a better life and building a better future, you can expect different kinds of opposition. Nothing is easy in this life.

Now, when I talk about opposition, I don't necessarily mean being opposed by people only. Although in this chapter, Nehemiah and his people faced opposition mainly from human adversaries. So, by opposition, I mean being opposed by unfortunate circumstances like financial problems, natural calamities, physical infirmities, mental health sickness, anything that's an obstacle to the pursuit of an opportunity.

You know, one of the greatest tests of character is going to be how you handle opposition in life, and God is watching your response. Do you panic under pressure?

Do you become discouraged and quickly give up when there's opposition or obstacle? Do you give up your dream because of what seems to be an insurmountable mountain in front of you?

Now, one of the reasons Nehemiah's story of rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem is in the Bible, why it's there, is to teach us how to effectively handle inevitable opposition or obstacle when it happens in your life. God wants you to be prepared to handle disapproval, to handle criticism, to handle problems and difficulties. Because opposition/obstacles will come. They will. We just need to handle them God's way.

And so, we come today to Nehemiah chapter 4. Remember last week, in chapter 3, we looked at how Nehemiah organized the people and they started to rebuild the gates and walls of Jerusalem. It wasn't a cakewalk though because in chapter 4, we see the opposition they faced. Now, like before, please open your Bibles to this book and chapter so we can refer to the verses together. But unlike before, I'm going to read the whole chapter. So, please follow along.

From this chapter, I'd like to share with you this morning **three things you can do when you face opposition** or any kind of obstacle as you try to build your life.

Number one, first

**1. Work Wholeheartedly**

If we are to overcome opposition, we must be willing to work and work with all our hearts. Nehemiah 4:6 says, "So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart." There is nothing that we cannot do if our heart is in the work. Note two traits that characterized their willing work:

**a. They worked with others.**

I talked about this last week. And I'm repeating it because it is so important. It is so important that many great minds and thinkers of this world, work with others, like they form a team, in order to accomplish great things. Like Thomas Alva Edison. Do you know that many of his inventions became popular only because of Edwin Barnes, who was a brilliant marketer? Or Steve Jobs, who formed a business partnership with Steve Wozniak, who was actually more tech-savvy than Jobs and together they developed the concept of the Mac?

An African proverb says, "If you wanna run fast, run alone. If you wanna run far, run together."

So, folks, if you are to make progress and overcome the opposition, you must learn to work with others.

Two men were riding a bicycle built for two when they came to a steep hill. It took a great deal of struggle for the men to complete what proved to be a very steep climb. When they got to the top the man in front said to the other, "Man, that was a hard climb!" The guy in back said, "Yes it was. And if I hadn't kept the brakes on all the way we would have rolled down backwards."

The lesson is we must peddle in the same direction if we want to go forward. Another characteristic we see about the Israelites is

**b. They worked with tenacity.**

These Jewish builders persevered greatly despite the opposition. They undertook the task. By chapter four they had built the wall halfway. I believe that the Lord mentioned that in the account because the halfway point is the most critical point in any project. For example, a car loses its newness about halfway through the payments. The kids have spilt coke on the carpet and McDonald sacks are stuffed behind the back seat. Yet, there are still 36 payments to go! You can't stop halfway. Or a distance race. It is hardest halfway through. It's not the initial burst of adrenaline nor the final kick when the finish line is in view.

It's that pounding, painful middle that is so crucial. Nehemiah challenges his people to go the distance and finish the wall. Their tenacity carried them through to the finish line.

Work wholeheartedly. That's the first thing you need to remember if you would overcome opposition. Second,

## 2. Anticipate attacks.

Not only must you work wholeheartedly, but you must also anticipate that there will be attacks upon your work. Charles Lowery, a psychologist and motivational speaker said, "Prepare for criticism. The greater the work, the greater the criticism. Remember you only get shot at when you are close to the target."

Let me share with you three truths about attacks that will prepare you:

### a. They are certain.

If you are going to serve God and his purposes, you will certainly face opposition. The Bible says in 2 Tim. 3:12, "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted". Notice that the enemies of God did not bother the Jews as long as their city was in ruins. Only when they arose and began to rebuild did opposition come. Warren Wiersbe said, "If you start building, you will soon be battling; so, be prepared!"

Jesus faced criticism and hecklers at every turn. When He healed the man with the withered hand, they wanted to kill Him! Amazing, isn't it? For the good that He did, He faced violent opposition.

### b. They are continuous.

Sanballat and the other enemies of the Jewish remnant hounded Nehemiah's every step. When he began the wall, they were there. When they reached the halfway point, the critics were there. When they finished the wall, the critics were still there.

You see, Satan will oppose our Christian growth as long as we live. Bank on it. But you know, attacks may be certain and continuous, but

### c. They are conquerable

Now, all these attacks did not deter Nehemiah one bit. He was going to finish the wall no matter what. He faced a lot of criticism both inside and outside, but he did not cave in to criticism.

Rick Warren has faced relentless criticism in the course of building one of America's great contemporary churches. This is what he says, "When criticized, I try to remember an important truth from John Bunyan: 'If my life is fruitless, it doesn't matter who praises me, and if my life is fruitful, it doesn't matter who criticizes me.'"

So, as you work wholeheartedly and anticipate attacks as you pursue your goal in life, you must remember to

### 3. Respond rightly.

Now, as we see in this chapter, ridicule, criticism, threats, and insults were the primary weapons that Sanballat used against Nehemiah and the Jews. They questioned everything about the Jewish workers. They questioned their character calling them "feeble Jews." They questioned their commitment asking, "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?" (Nehemiah 4:2) They even questioned their competence. Tobias says in verse 3, "What they are building—even a fox climbing up on it would break down their wall of stones!" (Nehemiah 4:3)

Folks, if you are doing God's work, you can expect to experience the same. But you know what? Criticism can hurt us, but it can never harm us unless we allow it into our system and poison us.

So, how do you respond to criticism? Don't react to criticism, but also don't retaliate against criticism. But continue to do the Lord's work with a strong and faithful heart. David Brinkley, the television journalist once said, "A successful man is one who can lay a firm foundation with the bricks others have thrown at him." That is exactly what Nehemiah did. Now, I want to give you three practical steps on how to deal with opposition and criticism.

**a. Pray for God to Fight for You.**

As we have seen already, that was Nehemiah's attitude. At the very beginning of this book, Nehemiah prayed every time he faced opposition or obstacle. He was truly a man of prayer. He prays in verses 4-5,

"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." (Nehemiah 4:4-5)

The very first thing Nehemiah did, was to take the criticism directly to the Lord. That is the wonderful thing about our Heavenly Father – He is always available and listens to the sorrows of our heart. The real danger of opposition and criticism is, when we begin to focus too much on the opposition instead of focusing on the work that God has called us to do. Do not focus on the negative power of your opposition such that you forget the almighty power of God. Someone said, "He who kneels before God can stand before anyone."

So, be prayerful and also

**b. Ponder the faithfulness of God.**

In verse 14, Nehemiah gathered all the people and said, "Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome..."

He said those encouraging words because he realized that the people have become weary and really discouraged.

All they've been hearing were criticisms and threats and they were afraid of being killed by Sanballat and his cohorts. So, he had to lift them up and exhort them and to make them remember how God has been faithful to them in the past.

David himself went through the deep valleys in life. During those times when he was down, he would bring to mind how God has protected him. In **Psalm 42:3-4**, he says, "My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me all day long, 'Where is your God?' These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I used to go to the house of God under the protection of the Mighty One."

When you are deep in turmoil, it helps to think back to previous victories and call to mind specific things God did for you. Remember the Lord of your past is also the Lord right now.

Chuck Swindoll narrates the time he and his wife went through a difficult time. This is what he wrote, (and I quote) "I remember my first year at Dallas Seminary. Cynthia and I lived in an apartment on campus that wasn't air-conditioned. It stayed hot even during the early fall of the year. Knowing that summer would surely come the following year, we began to pray for a window air conditioner. In fact, we prayed through the cold winter and cool spring months for it. We told no one; we just prayed. Nothing happened for months. Zero response. Late that spring we made a trip home to Houston during a brief Easter weekend. Summer was coming, still no air conditioner. Dallas would soon be an oven! "Another hundred days of hundred-degree weather," we used to say. We didn't announce our trip home; except for our family, no one knew we were coming. We had not been home visiting Cynthia's folks for even an hour before the phone rang. On the other end of the line was a man from our home church.

Surprised, he said, "Chuck, is that you?"

I answered, "Yes."



His next words were: "Do you and Cynthia need a window air conditioner? We just installed a new central heating and air conditioning unit, and my wife and I thought you two could use the one we've replaced."

What a great God we have!

Similar things have occurred since that happened, but to this day, when I get low and blue regarding needs, I call to mind that marvelous day back in the spring of 1960 when our Lord provided for our specific need.” (end of quote)

### c. Persevere till the end.

In verse 21, we read, “So we continued the work with half the men holding spears, from the first light of dawn till the stars came out.”

Nehemiah knew that it was important for them to get back to work. They worked through the night. They even slept in their clothes. Nehemiah led the way. He was persistent. He was faithful and He endured to the end.

Folks, never let your spirit be weakened by discouragement. Be persistent. The only way the opposition will win is if you quit. The devil's two favorite words are these: "Give up." Is the devil tempting you right now to give up? To give up on an idea? To give up on your vision? To give up on reading the Bible? To give up on making time for God?

The other night, we watched the movie “American Underdog” in Vudu. You can now stream the movie from Vudu, Amazon Prime Video, Apple, etc. The movie is the story of Kurt Warner, who went from stocking shelves at a supermarket to becoming an American Football star. The film centers on Warner's unique story and years of challenges and setbacks that could have derailed his aspirations to become an NFL player. Now, this is spoiler alert. Early in his career nobody believed in him – except his wife and children.

Practically all NFL teams didn't want to draft him so he played in a smaller version of the NFL called Arena Football which was described as a circus just so he could earn some money to keep his family afloat. He became successful in that league although he didn't win the championship but one team, the LA Rams, invited him to try out. When the coaches came together to discuss whether he should be hired, some criticized him because he played only in Arena Football. They thought he would wither in the NFL. Well, he proved them wrong. He led the team to a Super Bowl win in 2000 and he was the MVP in that championship game. He credited God, his wife, his children, and those who supported him for the win.

Folks, you are never defeated in anything until you give up. Nothing can defeat persistence. Therefore, strengthen your soul and spirit with the Word of God. Strengthen your soul and mind so that the words of the opposition do not affect you.