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Voices of Opposition



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Everyone hears voices ... voices trapped in our mind...voices of criticism...voices of ridicule...voices aimed to hurt. The voices you hear may have come from the lips of a parent, teacher, coach, spouse, child or friend. These voices spring from our memory when we least expect them and can knock us for a loop.

Sometimes the voices are not trapped in our mind but trajected from the person standing next to us. They are words that pierce like a sword, as the Proverb says, and after the attack we are left emotionally bruised and bloodied.

Sometimes the voices come from Satan himself. He loves to remind us of our past sin—How do you think you could ever be worthy of God? He loves to bring up our past failure—See how you failed in the past? Don't you dare try anything worthwhile again, don't take any risk. See how God let you down? You'll fall flat on your face again. And he loves to keep us focused on our weaknesses—How could God ever use you?

Do you hear voices of opposition? If so, keep reading. Let me introduce you to a man named Nehemiah. Let's identify some voices of opposition that he heard. Through Nehemiah's experience we can learn to deal with our voices of opposition.

Nehemiah was the cupbearer of King Artaxerxes, a privileged position in the powerful Persian Empire. He pre-tested the king's wine (If Nehemiah clutched his throat and dropped dead the king knew not to drink it). His responsibility also included keeping things merry and lively during dinner. But as Nehemiah's

story begins, he is having a hard time wearing a smile. Nehemiah was a Jew and had just been given a discouraging report about his homeland. Jerusalem, the center of the Jewish nation and religion, was in ruins. The people were living in disgrace. And the God he loved and served was being mocked. Nehemiah desired to return to Jerusalem to bring honor and dignity to God and his people by rebuilding the city walls.

By God's grace, King Artaxerxes gave Nehemiah permission to return and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. But soon those working on the walls started hearing voices of opposition. Some of the voices were purposed to implant doubt, fear and discouragement in the hearts of those working on the wall. Other voices came to distract the builders from their great endeavor. Let's consider these voices and Nehemiah's response.



came and told us ten times over, "Wherever you turn, they will attack us."

-Nehemiah 4:11-12

A man named Sanballat had a vested interest to keep the walls in shambles and the discouraged Jews under his thumb. Keeping the Jews down allowed him to maintain economic and political power. So, when the re-building began he pulled out all his verbal stops.

Sanballat questioned the builders' strength—What are those feeble Jews doing? He questioned their ability—Will they restore their wall? He questioned their spiritual preparation—Will they offer sacrifices? He questioned their planning and wisdom to take on such a project—Will they finish in a day? He questioned their resources—Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble, burned as they are? Sanballat's friend Tobiah joined in as well. He questioned the Jew's ability to build a lasting final product—If even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones!

Maybe you have a Sanballat in your life. Ignore him! If it's a Janballat, ignore her. Listening to voices, whether from the past or in the present, will paralyze our spiritual progress. Plug your ears to voices of doubt and keep building the wall!

Voices of Fear

Sanballat, Tobiah and their allies decided to join forces to attack Jerusalem. The fear of attack, they thought, would certainly take Nehemiah's mind off the building project. The Jews in the area got wind of the attack and informed Nehemiah of the plans:

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

Fear spreads, doesn't it? Like a disease it is transferred to those around us. Moses knew this well. Once before a battle he gave the instruction, "Is any man afraid or fainthearted? Let him go home so that his brothers will not become disheartened too" (Dt. 20:8).

How do you handle voices of fear? Are you listening to the rumors around you or the certain voice of God?

Voices of Discouragement

The builders got tired and discouraged. They said, "The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall" (4:10). I believe that discouragement comes in three steps. First, we lose our strength. Second, we lose our vision. And finally, we enter into a spiritual compromise. Let's consider these steps of discouragement.

• **Loss of strength**

Many times discouragement comes when you are physically drained. I remember reading the story of a prominent Christian leader's affair. While offering no excuses, he noted that the temptation and sin took place when he was physically exhausted.

Physical exhaustion affects our will. After a while, there doesn't seem to be enough inner strength to keep going.

Discouragement makes you feel isolated and alone, even from God. The loss of spiritual strength is a nail in the coffin of discouragement.

• Loss of vision

Nehemiah's men worked hard. They gave it everything they had. The wall was half its height—that should have been encouraging. In the midst of ridicule and doubt, they kept on building. Nehemiah reported, "So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart" (4:6).

Unfortunately, not everyone was optimistic. "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'" (4:10). What a classic example of seeing the glass half empty! "Forget what we've done; there is so much left to do."

• Spiritual Compromise

Spiritual compromise can be the result of discouragement. After the wall had been rebuilt, many of the Jews decided to ignore God's command to rest on the Sabbath. They wanted to make a little extra money. Also, in yet another act of disobedience, many of the Jews decided to take wives from the surrounding nations.

No wonder the men of Judah saw the rubble on the ground instead of the wall that had been built. No wonder they became discouraged and spread discouragement. They were living in spiritual compromise.

Voices of Greed

So the wall was completed on the twenty fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days. When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized

that this work had been done with the help of our God.

-Nehemiah 6:15-16

Nehemiah and the builders completed the wall in record time. But voices of opposition don't stop when the work is finished. The enemy continued efforts to tear the people down.

When Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls, hundreds of Jews who had been living in Susa returned with him. Soon it became evident that there wasn't enough food to go around. Many of the Jews who had been living in Jerusalem had plenty of food but were not willing to share. The prices they put on grain amounted to extortion. Husbands and wives came to Nehemiah and "raised a great outcry against their Jewish brothers" (Neh. 5:1). Forget the enemy. This was brother versus brother.

The great outcry came from three groups. The first group consisted of parents with large families. If their children were going to stay alive they needed grain. Landowners comprised the second group. They were mortgaging everything they owned in order to buy food (Neh. 5:3). Because of the difficult times, a third group had to take out loans to pay the king's taxes on their fields and vineyards. Debt rendered them powerless. And, in the extreme cases, the creditors had enslaved sons and daughters (Neh. 5:4-5).

Nehemiah was a great leader. He inspired and motivated and set the vision. The rebuilding effort was getting done. But now, Nehemiah had to give attention to this internal conflict of greed. The strong leader dealt with the issue decisively.

I and my brothers and my men are also lending people money and grain. But let the exacting of usury stop! Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the usury you

are charging them—the hundredth part of the money, grain, new wine and oil.

- Nehemiah 5:10-11

Greed must be confronted. First, we must deal with it in our life. Jesus said,

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. “No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.

- Matthew 6:21, 24

Then he said to them, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”

- Luke 12:15

Confront the voices of greed in your heart.

Voices of Distraction

After the rebuilding of the wall had been successfully completed, Nehemiah received an interesting invitation.

When word came to Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall and not a gap was left in it—though up to that time I had not set the doors in the gates— Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message: “Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono.”

- Nehemiah 6:1-2a

Ono was about twenty miles from Jerusalem in a beautiful, lush area. Nehemiah had been working hard and certainly deserved a little retreat. But the wise

leader discerned the real reason for the invitation. He realized that his enemies were scheming to harm him (Neh. 6:2b). Nehemiah dealt with the invitation quickly and decisively.

So I sent messengers to them with this reply: I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?

-Nehemiah 6:3

How do you deal with distractions? The more success you have; the more distractions will come—awards, plaques, bonuses, promotions, requests for advice, head hunters at your door. Be careful. You’ll be tempted to forget about God. That’s what Satan is after. He attempts to use everything in our life—even the good things—to take your heart away from God. We will be well served to follow Nehemiah’s lead: I am just going to stay here and keep my focus on the mission that God has called me to.

After Nehemiah’s initial reply, he had ample opportunity to change his mind: “Four times they sent me the same message, and each time I gave them the same answer” (Neh. 6:4). Since the invitation to Ono didn’t work, Nehemiah’s enemies tried another angle.

Voices of Threat

Then, the fifth time, Sanballat sent his aide to me with the same message, and in his hand was an unsealed letter in which was written: “It is reported among the nations-- and Geshem says it is true-that you and the Jews are plotting to revolt, and therefore you are building the wall. Moreover, according to these reports you are about to become their king.

-Nehemiah 6:5-6

This time, Sanballat and his men tried starting a rumor by putting forth an undocumented account. I have talked to a lot of people and this is what they are saying.... Nehemiah, though, knew the purpose of the threat was to fill him and his people with fear. He said, "They were all trying to frighten us, thinking, 'Their hands will get too weak for the work, and it will not be completed'" (Neh. 6:9a).

If you are involved in a great endeavor for God, not everyone is going to agree with your mission. The rumor mill may well be an effort to get you off track. Learn from Nehemiah. He dealt with rumors by defending the truth: "I sent him this reply: 'Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head'" (Neh. 6:8). But even strong leaders like Nehemiah are not strong enough to lead alone. After sending his reply, Nehemiah prayed "Now strengthen my hands" (Neh. 6:9b).

Nehemiah did not take it upon himself to squelch every rumor. He simply defended the truth, prayed, and let God handle the rest.

Voices of Intimidation

One day I went to the house of Shemaiah son of Delaiah, the son of Mehetabel, who was shut in at his home. He said, "Let us meet in the house of God, inside the temple, and let us close the temple doors, because men are coming to kill you—by night they are coming to kill you."

I realized that God had not sent him, but that he had prophesied against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. He had been hired to intimidate me so that I would commit a sin by doing this, and then they would give me a bad name to discredit me.

- Nehemiah 6:10, 12-13

Notice how Nehemiah dealt with the voices of intimidation:

But I said, "Should a man like me run away? Or should someone like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go!" I realized that God had not sent him, but that he had prophesied against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him.

- Nehemiah 6:11-12

Nehemiah was on God's mission. He refused to be intimidated. And, although these men were out to get him, he resisted revenge. He turned them over to God, praying, "Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, my God, because of what they have done; remember also the prophet Noadiah and how she and the rest of the prophets have been trying to intimidate me" (Neh. 6:14). *God, you take care of them. You can do a much better job than I can.*



As Christians, we are going to be faced with doubt, fear and discouragement. We live in a culture of greed. There will be those who threaten us, intimidate us and try to distract us from following hard after Christ. How do we deal with these things that try to tear us down and paralyze us? Here are five things we need to do.

1. Understand your position in Christ.

In times of doubt, fear and discouragement the enemy will try to distance us from God. If you are a Christian, understand that you are a treasured child of the living God. That is something you need to remind yourself of constantly. Every thought that contradicts the truth of God's love needs to be corralled and aligned with the truth in God's Word. Heed the words of the Apostle Paul, "We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of Christ, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5).

Doubt will come but, by God's grace, you will not turn into a doubter. Things will come into your life that will cause fear but, through Christ, fear will not be paralyzing. As a human living on this earth, there will be times of discouragement but, by God's grace, you will not lose your eternal perspective and will evaluate your heart to make sure discouragement has not been aided and abetted by spiritual compromise.

2. Understand the power of prayer.

Nehemiah was a man of prayer. Before he went to King Artaxerxes to ask permission to return to Jerusalem, he petitioned God (Nehemiah 1:5-11). Nehemiah continued to pray as he faced opposition from Sanballat and his men (Nehemiah 4:4-5, 9).

There are many things in our life that we cannot fix. But we can turn them over to God. Paul gave this reminder to the Philippians:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

- Philippians 4:6-7

3. Trust God.

There are two questions that every believer must ask. The first one is, "Can you trust God?" emphasis on trust. The second question is, "Can you trust God?" emphasis on you. The first question is philosophical. The second is rubber on the road practical.

Fear will come. It did for David, the man after God's own heart. But when anxiety came David made a decision. He said,

When I am afraid, I will trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can mortal man do to me?

-Psalm 56:3-4

The prophet Isaiah made the same decision. He wrote,

Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The LORD, the LORD, is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation.

-Isaiah 12:2

Fear will come. We must decide to trust.

4. Be Prepared!

While we understand our position in Christ, prayer and trust; Nehemiah reminds us that we need to be prepared. Notice the details of Nehemiah's preparation.

Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, "Wherever you turn, they will attack us." 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. 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, and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes." When our enemies heard that we were aware of their plot and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to his own work. 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. 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!" 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 workmen 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.

-Nehemiah 4:12-23

Here are some lessons we can learn from Nehemiah's preparation.

- **They acknowledged the threat.**

Acknowledge what causes your fear, doubt and/or discouragement. When we acknowledge the issue, we can begin to deal with it. Peter wrote,

Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith....

-1 Peter 5:8-9

- **They stood guard.**

Nehemiah's men were ready for the battle. Whether day or night, they did not take off their clothes. Even when they went for water, each man carried his weapon with him. We must stand guard.

For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform signs and miracles to deceive the elect—if that were possible. So be on your guard; I have told you everything ahead of time.

-Mark 13:22-23

- **They stood together.**

There is nothing that weakens an army like division. Nehemiah and his men stayed together. And so must we!

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

-Hebrews 10:24-25

5. Read the Word of God daily.

God's Word is the inerrant instruction manual for our life. It tells us the paths to take and the paths to avoid. It transcends culture. God's Word is just as relevant today as it was when the ink was still wet on the parchment. But Scripture is more than just a manual; it is "living and active" (Heb. 4:12). Through his Word, God teaches us, encourages us, inspires us and shows us how much he loves us. The Apostle Paul says it this way,

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

-2 Timothy 3:16-17

If we are going to be thoroughly equipped for the voices of opposition, we must read and meditate on God's Word daily.

Do you hear voices? Voices of fear, doubt and discouragement? Voices of greed, distraction, threats and intimidation? It's easy to allow these voices to turn up the volume and drown out the focus, peace and confidence that God desires. But from Nehemiah we learn that God always gives us the strength to do what he calls us to do. Whether riding high in success or experiencing failure, the Heavenly Father will always be present with you. His help was not unique to Nehemiah. He is ready and able to carry you today.

Chuck Swindoll tells the story of the great pianist Paderewski who was holding a concert in a grand hall. A mother took her young boy to the concert and, as she was talking to friends, he slipped down the aisle, crawled onto the stage, made his way to the piano and started playing *Chopsticks*. The crowd, waiting for the great pianist, was aghast. From behind the stage, Paderewski saw what was taking place. He slipped behind the boy and whispered in his ear, "Keep playing...don't stop...keep playing." Paderewski accompanied the boy's *Chopsticks* with a brilliant arrangement that turned *Chopsticks* into a masterpiece.

That's what God does for us. When we are filled with fear, doubt and discouragement, he puts his arms around us and says, "Don't stop...keep playing... Don't stop." When we trust him, he strengthens our frightened hearts, bolsters our feeble efforts and chases away the discouragement. He can turn a life of chop-sticks into a brilliant masterpiece.

