

The Opposition is Real

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BIG IDEA - Words, like a social virus, can wound and infect others with fear, but faith can deflect and redirect those words to God, who has the final say.

scripture focus - Nehemiah 4:1-3 NLT - Sanballat & Tobiah - the fear whisperers.

“Sanballat was very angry when he learned that we were rebuilding the wall. He flew into a rage and mocked the Jews, saying in front of his friends and the Samaritan army officers, “What does this bunch of poor, feeble Jews think they’re doing? Do they think they can build the wall in a single day by just offering a few sacrifices? Do they actually think they can make something of stones from a rubbish heap—and charred ones at that?” **Tobiah the Ammonite, who was standing beside him, remarked, “That stone wall would collapse if even a fox walked along the top of it!”**

The old “sticks and stones” adage was meant to inspire courage within the African American community in the 1860’s. The African Methodist Episcopal Church wanted their congregation to stand up against tyranny and unjust laws. However, it became a denial of truth when talking about the damage words alone have done. **Words are the first volley of violence when a person or a group has felt mistreated, misunderstood or misled!** Have you ever been wronged? The opposition to building the wall in Nehemiah was real, but there is another side of the story.

sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me

It is reported^[1] to have appeared in *The Christian Recorder* of March 1862, a publication of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, where it is presented as an "old adage" in this form:

Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never break me.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sticks_and_Stones

Known as a Irreversible Binomial, the words Sticks and Stones cannot be reversed. Like bread and butter, milk and honey and do or die, they would awkwardly lose meaning if reversed.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irreversible_binomial

Words, like a social virus, can wound and infect others with fear, but faith can deflect and redirect those words to God, who has the final say.

Nehemiah finds out the opposition is real.

Observation #1 – Opposition starts with verbal mockery

Nehemiah 4:1-3 NLT

“**Sanballat was very angry** when he learned that we were rebuilding the wall. He flew into a rage and mocked the Jews, saying in front of his friends and the Samaritan army officers, “What does this bunch of poor, feeble Jews think they’re doing? **Do they think they can build the wall in a single day** by just offering a few sacrifices? Do they actually think they can make something of stones from a rubbish heap—and charred ones at that?” **Tobiah the Ammonite, who was standing beside him, remarked, “That stone wall would collapse if even a fox walked along the top of it!”**

Anger, frustration, bitterness come raging out like a volcano that’s been storing molten lava just beneath the surface.

Why was Sanballat so angry? I can think of a few reasons that would be common for someone in his position:

1. The rebuilding of the wall **made him look bad**, like an inept leader. All this time, as a city official he could have organized a rebuild campaign and even asked for money from Artaxerxes himself.
2. Nehemiah and the rebuild meant he was **removed from his office**. Maybe not officially, but unofficially King Artaxerxes was replacing him. People normally don’t like to lose “face and power.”
3. His entire **future was at risk**. Sanballat must have built a lot of alliances with the surrounding tribes, but had not done much for his own local people - they were regularly being raided! Now, with 40,000 Jews returning and another million in their way, Sanballat knew it was over.

Sanballat had solid reasoning for his anger, but it didn’t help him to change his behavior, to BECOME better, not bitter, to make real change in his life and rise to be a great leader.

No, he chose to intimidate, tear down and work against God himself! You don’t want to find yourself on the WRONG SIDE of God’s will.

Q: Have you ever been WRONGED? How did it make you feel?

Q: What would a do-over look like in Sanballat's life? Seeing his response, **what could you do differently** in your own life when faced with change?

Sanballat's words did reach their target.

We cannot just say, "oh, they're just words" and give them a pass to bounce around in our head. We have stop them, confront them.

Listen to Nehemiah's response to words "that will never break me."

Observation #2 - Reflect on words, but redirect them to God

Nehemiah 4:4-6 NLT

"Then I prayed, "**Hear us, our God, for we are being mocked.** May their scoffing fall back on their own heads, and may they themselves become captives in a foreign land! Do not ignore their guilt. Do not blot out their sins, for **they have provoked you to anger here in front of the builders.**" **At last the wall was completed to half its height around the entire city, for the people had worked with enthusiasm.**"

The opening line gets me. "**Then I prayed!**" Let's repeat that together, "**Then I prayed.**" That may be the best reason for you coming today, or hearing this online. After reflecting on what was said immediately do what Nehemiah consistently did in his life - **then I prayed!**

Then he uses words of solidarity that means so much in an intense, high emotional state of stress - **US & WE.**

for... **WE**, not "I" nor "they" but "we"

We are being mocked!

He did not say for **I am being mocked** or **they are being mocked**, but **We are being mocked!** And later, Nehemiah, like David reminded God that **He was being mocked**, when he wrote, **they have provoked you to anger in front of the builders.**

Q: How important is it that you don't feel alone in life's struggles? Share a story about a time you knew friends were praying and had your back.

I am sorry not sorry for making such a big deal out of little words or phrases, but words have a tremendous effect on our thinking which quickly determine our behavior.

Words oftentimes make the difference between winning or losing, finishing or languishing!

Nehemiah heard the words, but worse, the people heard the words, “poor, feeble Jews.”

The worst lies are mixed with a healthy dose of truth!

Q: How many times has a lie got the best of you? Care to share it?

Truth: **They were poor, many were old and feeble.**

Honest Question: **“Do they think?” Did they think they could build the wall in a single day?**

Ah, many of them did think it would go faster and be easier than it really was!

You might think me negative, but now, in my older age, **I never think a project, or a job will go easy and certainly not quickly.**

I never underestimate Murphy's Law! What is Murphy's Law?

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murphy's_law **“Anything that can go wrong will go wrong.”** It's actually very positive to plan for the unplanned!

You can see something going wrong as an opportunity to learn or even a rare experience to be creative and fix was was unfixable! The military has their own positive spin Murphy's Law - “plan once, plan twice.” This is much preferred over their other acronymic phrase, SNAFU.

Nehemiah's faith allowed him to redirect the taunts and mockery to God and request that God deal with them directly. We are not built to handle harsh words! We store them up and let them fester in our soul, let them cause us to pull back, shrink or kill our dreams and aspirations.

But even as they built or “bind” (qashar: to bind) the wall they also built and bound their hearts and minds as one to finish the task! It's a Hebrew play on words, “they bound the wall even as they bound their minds... together.”

The Hebrew language is a meant to engage the whole being, eliciting emotions, memories, even pictures.

Here, Nehemiah uses the word bind to allow the reader to experience the times God has asked them to join together. This is the word Moses writes when God tells the people to bind His word to their foreheads. It was used literally or metaphorically to even bring two ideas together like in this case with Nehemiah. He could have just as easily used the word “build,” bānāh refers to the construction of houses, temples and certainly stone walls.

Observation #3 - Physical threats normally follow verbal threats

The enemy stepped it up to the next phase: physical threats!

It's one thing to deal with VERBAL volleys, it's a whole other thing to deal with actual physical threats.

Nehemiah 4:7-9 NLT

"But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs, Ammonites, and Ashdodites heard that the work was going ahead and that the gaps in the wall of Jerusalem were being repaired, they were furious. **They all made plans to come and fight against Jerusalem and throw us into confusion. But we prayed to our God and guarded the city day and night to protect ourselves.**"

You're seeing the pattern here, right? The enemy intensifies the attack so Nehemiah and the people also step up their defense:

Pray and keep watch!

Q: Why is it so hard to recognize and respond to this pattern (feel attacked, then pray) the best way?

Observation #4 - Exhaustion weakens resolve

Then in verse 10 it reaches the point where the mockery, threats and feelings of disillusionment begin to creep into the hearts of the people. **It was now the people hesitated and reflected back on the words and fears, to begin to BELIEVE the lies and the threats.**

They did not express fear of the enemy, but rather, fear of their own capabilities to finish what they started!

Nehemiah 4:10 NLT

"Then the people of Judah began to complain, "The workers are **getting tired**, and there is **so much rubble to be moved.** **We will never be able to build the wall** by ourselves."

When you're praying and guarding it's exhausting!

And when we are exhausted, we tend to think and behave poorly!

Do you know how things in an organization, business or a church start showing up when people are exhausted or have no idea where they are going or what is happening around them?

It starts showing up as complaints. And, next step is despair.

Question: Who reminded them about how much rubble there was?

Sandballot's words were sinking into the reality of what they saw everyday they got up and went to work on the wall. **"Do they actually think they can make something of stones from a rubbish heap—and charred ones at that?"**



They responded like Eore, in Winnie the Pooh...

We will never be able to build the wall by ourselves.

Some get angry when we speak honest thoughts that are absolutely negative!

They say, "don't speak it!" "Don't confess it." Thinking that if we say it out loud it either gives the devil the advantage or **you MAKE it come true just because you spoke it.** This is controversial in the culture of the Church and it is one of many things that make believes look so silly **TAKING SIDES** on stuff like this.

Often quoted is Proverbs 27:3, "For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he: Eat and drink, saith he to thee; but his heart is not with thee."

This wisdom thought is a guide, not a promise. It is also based on this Hebrew word for "thinketh." **Barnes' Notes on the Bible** writes "Thinketh - The Hebrew verb is found here only, and probably means, "**as he is all along in his heart, so is he (at last) in act.**" The Hebrew word, **shaar: to calculate, reckon or estimate.** This verse is not talking about "confessions coming true," it's about a duplicitous or dualistic heart and aligning our behaviors accordingly.

I would much rather follow the real Biblical principle and quit listening to some preachers who go off on either a some weird personal tangent or has lifted a theory to then state it as theology.

Q: What's your take on this "don't confess negative thoughts lest they come true?" How does that compare with name it to tame it?

Sanballat tossed a verbal grenade into their heads, they were exhausted and they **nibbled on the bait of a lie**. I get it! We all get it. It happens all the time.

I'm not going to waste my time letting it steal one more second of sanity while these thoughts keeps me frozen and indecisive.

I'm going to speak it out and then speak to my God about it. **The modern process is "NAME IT TO TAME IT - BABY!"**

The people said, "**we will never be able to build the wall.**" It was written, recorded and now becomes part of the story we are living today. **But that wasn't true was it?**

It got worse before it got better.

Observation #5 - Enemy chatter will increase, but so can our faith

Nehemiah 4:11-14 NLT

"Meanwhile, our enemies were saying, "**Before they know what's happening, we will swoop down on them and kill them and end their work.**" The Jews who lived near the enemy came and told us again and again, "**They will come from all directions and attack us!**" So I placed armed guards behind the lowest parts of the wall in the exposed areas. I stationed the people to stand guard by families, armed with swords, spears, and bows. Then as I looked over the situation, **I called together the nobles and the rest of the people** and said to them, "**Don't be afraid of the enemy! Remember the Lord, who is great and glorious, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes!**"

Nehemiah finds out and does two things:

One, **Takes immediate action: placed guards and stationed people with weapons.**

Two, **he rallies the people!** Calling the nobles and people together for a pep talk, a half-time, "we can do this," kind of pep talk.

Three powerful phrases redirect their hearts:

Do not fear!

Remember, God is great!

Fight for your family!

Q: Nehemiah called people TOGETHER to rally. **Isn't it tough to "rally" alone when you're going through difficult times?**

Observation #6 – Be Ready and Resolved

Nehemiah 4:15-23 NLT

“When our enemies heard that we knew of their plans and that God had frustrated them, we all returned to our work on the wall. But from then on, only **half my men worked while **the other half stood guard** with spears, shields, bows, and coats of mail. The leaders stationed themselves behind the people of Judah who were building the wall. The laborers carried on their work with **one hand supporting their load and one hand holding a weapon.** All the builders had a sword belted to their side. The trumpeter stayed with me to sound the alarm. Then I explained to the nobles and officials and all the people, “The work is very spread out, and we are widely separated from each other along the wall. **When you hear the blast of the trumpet, rush to wherever it is sounding. Then our God will fight for us!**” We worked early and late, from sunrise to sunset. And half the men were always on guard. I also told everyone living outside the walls to stay in Jerusalem. That way they and their servants could help with **guard duty at night and work during the day. During this time, none of us—not I, nor my relatives, nor my servants, nor the guards who were with me—ever took off our clothes. We carried our weapons with us at all times, even when we went for water.**”**

Seth Godin. **Linchpin.**



Two quotes from Seth's book I am reminded of today,

“Leaders don't get a map or a set of rules. Living life without a map requires a different attitude”

And **“Leaders feel the fear, acknowledges it, then proceeds anyways.”**

No one gave Nehemiah the exact blueprint on how this wall rebuild project was going to get done. And, he certainly had no idea who or what would be opposing him or the idea. The only thing he knew was the wall was down and destroyed and it needs to be rebuilt.

I am learning from God's word, through this story of Nehemiah because I absolutely, 100% know that the Church ours and thousands of others have work to do when it comes to rebuilding in the face of massive cultural and a whole slew of political, economic, educational, and most definitely spiritual changes that have taken place.

After the tornado of the pandemic, we should be saying like Dorothy saying to her little dog in the Wizard of Oz, **“Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore.”**

I know we need to pray and I know we need to plan. But I'm telling you, we're all aware that there will be struggles and the opposition is real.

What about your own life? How's it going? Are you on the receiving end of words and lies? Are you struggling with threats and fears that are very real? How about not going it all alone.

How about us coming together to pray, hear God and rally today, remembering God is great and fighting for our families and friends?

Sometimes I wonder if the best effort for a big dream in the face of real opposition is simply sticking together in faith, determination and grit!

NOTES

Questions

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Scriptures

Nehemiah 4:1-3 NLT

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situation, I called together the nobles and the rest of the people and said to them, “Don’t be afraid of the enemy! Remember the Lord, who is great and glorious, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes!”

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COMMENTARY REFERENCES

The Bible Knowledge Commentary

Nehemiah 4:1–3 (BKC): sanballat’s psychological warfare (4:1–3)

4:1–3. As noted earlier (2:10) Sanballat was displeased when he heard that Nehemiah had returned to Jerusalem to help the Jews. **Sanballat, however, did not know of God’s interest in His people**. Sanballat’s displeasure turned to intense anger (4:1; cf. v. 7). So with his associates, including Tobiah (2:19; 4:3; also cf. v. 7; 6:1, 12, 14) and Geshem (2:19), and **in the presence of Samaritan soldiers, Sanballat ridiculed the Jews. He accused them of rebelling against King Artaxerxes (2:19) and by a series of questions he suggested they were incapable of completing the project (4:2)**. Calling them feeble he asked if they would offer sacrifices. That is, could they possibly complete the walls so that they could then give sacrifices of thanksgiving? The question about finishing in a day suggests that the Jews did not know what they were undertaking. And how, Sanballat asked, could they use burned, weakened bricks from the heaps of debris? Tobiah the Ammonite (cf. 2:19), standing nearby, also tried to discourage the Jews. Ridiculing them, he said they were so inept in their work that a fox, weighing only a few pounds, would break it down by merely climbing up on it.

Nehemiah 4:4–5 (BKC): nehemiah’s spiritual response (4:4–6)

4:4–5. **Prayer was a distinct and consistent part of Nehemiah's approach to problem-solving.** When faced with Sanballat's demoralizing attack, he immediately asked God for help: Hear us, O our God, for we are despised. Like some of the imprecatory prayers in which the psalmists invoked God's condemnation on His enemies, Nehemiah's prayer in this instance was severe and condemning. He prayed that Sanballat and his cohorts would be taken captive and that they would be judged for their sins. How should a Christian interpret this kind of praying, especially in view of what Jesus Christ said about praying for one's enemies? (Matt. 5:44; cf. Rom. 12:14, 20) Several facts need to be noted. First, in opposing the Jews, **Sanballat "and company" were actually opposing God.** Second, God had already pronounced judgment on Israel's enemies. Nehemiah was praying according to God's will—that God would deliver Jerusalem from her enemies (Josh. 1:5). Third, Nehemiah was praying that **God would bring about what He had promised Abraham regarding those who curse His people (Gen. 12:3).** Fourth, vengeance belongs to God, not to Nehemiah or other believers (cf. Deut. 32:35; Rom. 12:19). Also see comments on the imprecatory psalms in the Introduction to the Book of Psalms.

Nehemiah 4:6 (BKC): 4:6. After praying, Nehemiah and the Jews continued with the work. **Some Christians pray and then wait for things to happen, but not Nehemiah! As in all his efforts, he blended the divine perspective with the human. He faced Sanballat's opposition with both prayer and hard work.** Once he committed the problem to the Lord, he trusted God to help them achieve their goal. And while praying and trusting, they rebuilt the wall to half its height. At this juncture their task was half completed. Sanballat and Tobiah's efforts at demoralizing the Jews failed. The Jews rose above their enemies' attempts at discouragement. Because the people worked so diligently and enthusiastically (with all their heart), they were able to complete half the job in a surprisingly short period of time. Nehemiah wrote later (6:15) that the entire task was completed in 52 days (about eight weeks of 6 days each), so possibly this halfway point took about four weeks

The New Bible Commentary

Nehemiah 4:1–5 (NBC): Further opposition

It is noteworthy that each stage of Nehemiah's activity was met with opposition, every time introduced with the formula 'when so-and-so heard'; (cf. vs 1, 7; 2:10, 19; 6:1, 16.) As the work progressed, so the opposition grew more fierce and the description of the response more elaborate.

4:1–5 Ridicule. Sanballat and Tobiah here amplify their mockery of 2:19 in an attempt both to demoralize the builders (5) and to reassure their own supporters

Expository Dictionary of Bible Words: Word Studies for Key English Bible Words

qāshar [7194, קָשַׁר] binding the wall in Nehemiah 4:6.

Like the terms above, qāshar has **both a literal and a metaphorical level of meaning in the idea of “binding.”** This term is found in forty-four places in the Old Testament. The literal level of meaning accounts for about a quarter of the occurrences of qāshar. Deut. 6:8 and 11:18, for example, talk about the divine requirements of literally **tying portions of the law to one’s forehead** as a means of continually focusing on the centrality of the covenant in the life of the people of Yahweh (cf. also Prov. 3:3; 7:3). Then there are references to tying scarlet thread around the hand of the baby Zerah (cf. Gen. 38:28), and binding the scarlet cord to the widow Rahab's house (cf. Josh. 2:18, 21). Neh. 4:6 refers to the “joining together” of the reconstructed wall of Jerusalem. **The metaphorical sense of qāshar indicates “conspiracy”—a joining together, or bonding, in intimate association for an illicit purpose.** This is the dominant meaning of the verb. Examples of this are found in various contexts: Saul's accusations against his people (cf. 1 Sam. 22:8), and in particular against the priests of Nob (1 Sam. 22:13); conspiracies associated with kings of the divided monarchy (cf. 1 Kgs. 16:9ff. [Zimri]; 1 Kgs. 15:27 [Baasha]; 2 Kgs. 15:10 [Shallum]; 2 Kgs. 15:25 [Pekah]; 2 Kgs. 15:30 [Hoshea]; 2 Kgs. 21:23 [Ammon]; Neh. 4:8 [against Nehemiah]; 2 Sam. 15:31 [Ahithophel]). There is one striking positive use of qāshar in 1 Sam. 18:1, where the word describes the **intimate bond of friendship between David and Jonathan.**

Review

Review from Chapter One

1. see reality,
2. grieve the loss,
3. do something about it
4. recognize our part of the problem.
5. And together, in the months ahead, asking for God's help and favor.

Review from Chapter Two – first half

1. God is at work
2. Use the time to prepare
3. Let godly character and wisdom guide us
4. Take ownership - Our city, Our people
5. Be ready with plan

Review from Chapter Two – second half

1. You've got to see **who** you are up against
2. You've got to see **what** you are up against
3. You have to **make people see the truth!** Where they are and where they could be.
4. **Not everyone will join.** and some may openly oppose you and the plan.

Review from Chapter Three

1. Leaders go first.
2. People really matter to God; they should matter to us.
3. A commitment from all, no matter how large or how small, will eventually build the wall strong and tall.

Review from Chapter Four

1. Opposition starts with verbal mockery
2. Reflect on words, but redirect them to God
3. Physical threats normally follow verbal threats
4. Exhaustion weakens resolve
5. Enemy chatter will increase, but so can our faith
6. Be Ready and Resolved