

Well, it's good to be back. I just returned from a ten-day trip to Israel with a bunch of other pastors. I have been before, but the purpose of this trip was two-fold: the first was to eat ten gallons of hummus. Mission accomplished! The second was to learn how to lead a trip with your congregation (side note: I'm working on scheduling a Fellowship trip for this time next year). I learned something new this trip. The city of Jerusalem has been conquered 29 times and destroyed 19 times. Now, not all of those incidents have roots in the biblical narrative, but it illustrates that for centuries, the work of God and the people of God have been opposed. And virtually every Jew you talk to over there is keenly aware of that history, and there is a readiness for it to come again.

That got me thinking about the American church and this idea of being opposed. You talk to those in Israel or talk to some in our congregation who had to flee their homeland because of their faith, they will understand. But if you talk to the average American Christian? I'm not so sure. But here's the truth: If you are pursuing God's work, you will be opposed. Scripture won't let us escape from that reality. The people of God and work of God have been opposed since the beginning. Genesis 3 tells us of Adam and Eve being tempted in the Garden by the devil. The Bible ends with a battle of those who opposed to the rule of God. Jesus himself said the world will hate us because it hates him, the story of the Church in the book of Acts is full of opposition, and Paul writes about spiritual warfare in Ephesians 6. Scripture proclaims the difficult truth that opposition is unavoidable.

But for many of us, we haven't really experienced it, we don't understand it, we're not expecting it, and we wouldn't know how to engage it if it came our way. But it's clear there is growing animosity towards our faith, and it is important for us to be prepared. Thankfully we have the passage we're going to look at this morning, Nehemiah 4. And through it, my prayer is that we might finish this morning with a better understanding of the tactics and purpose of opposition, and some idea about how we should respond when it comes.

Let God handle what's God's to do. As the people of God called to do the work of God, something we must remember is that there are things only God can do.

[Nehemiah 4:1-5] Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews. ² And he said in the presence of his brothers and of the army of Samaria, "What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore it for themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish up in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, and burned ones at that?" ³ Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, "Yes, what they are building—if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall!" ⁴ Hear, O our God, for we are despised. Turn back their taunt on their own heads and give them up to be plundered in a land where they are captives. ⁵ Do not cover their guilt, and let not their sin be blotted out from your sight, for they have provoked you to anger in the presence of the builders.

While we have already seen these characters called Sanballat and Tobiah before and understand them to not be friendly to Nehemiah's cause, here they move aggressively and begin to oppose the work being done on the wall. The heart of their opposition is anger and rage. A fortified Jerusalem is a legitimate Jerusalem and a people to be reckoned with. This would threaten their

position in the region, so these two begin a campaign of intimidation and mockery in an effort to stop the work.

As I read this story, I kept thinking these guys reminded me of someone, and it finally dawned on me. You recognize these guys? Skut Farkus and Grover Dill, the two bullies from *A Christmas Story*. It is their life's mission to torment the children of their neighborhood. They begin with intimidation and, if you know the movie, it progresses to the threat of violence. Sanballat and Tobiah take the same approach.

Their mocking of the Jews highlights the magnitude of the task and the inferior materials at their disposal. They say this in the presence of the Jews and with an audience made up of brothers and the army of Samaria. **The purpose of this kind of opposition is discouragement and humiliation. Its intent is to get us to believe "I cannot make a difference, and I'll look like a fool if I try."**

Some of you know exactly what this looks and feels like. You have been the recipient of jeering or mockery. You've taken a stand for God and are paying the price at work. Or maybe in college you lived far from God but are now getting serious about your faith by changing the way you live, and there are some in your life that want none of it. Others of you are being told you don't have what it takes; that just like burned up stones being an inadequate resource to build a wall, the raw material known as you will keep you from accomplishing what God has stirred in your heart to accomplish. However you are being told you cannot make a difference, I encourage you to respond like Nehemiah responded.

While much of this passage is descriptive, Nehemiah's immediate response is prescriptive for all of us who engage our divine discontent: prayer. While we might expect to read that he asked for God's help in building the wall, Nehemiah's words are much different. He prays that God would hear these men's taunts, recognize they despise the Jews, and bring judgment on them. But Nehemiah adds an important aspect to his prayer that we would do well to remember when we are opposed. Rather than playing the victim and wallowing in self-pity, he instead acknowledges the mocking of these men is really the mocking of God himself. **And if it's God who is being mocked, it's God's business to deal with it.**

Nehemiah prays what's called an imprecatory prayer. You may have heard of an imprecatory psalm. It's a prayer that asks God to bring judgment on his enemies. We may feel uncomfortable with that idea, but it is a prayer that asks God to move in a way that is consistent with his character, his will, and his Word. We wouldn't hesitate to ask God to exercise the gracious and merciful aspects of his character, and here we see Nehemiah asking God to exercise his justice. God said he would judge Israel's enemies and curse those who curse Israel. And isn't it interesting that he asks to judge them in the same way he judged Israel?

Now, I don't want you to go out and spend all of this next week praying for hellfire to come down on your enemies. Remember that Jesus said we should love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, that they might repent and turn towards him. And that's a lot easier to do if we remember what this Old Testament saint is showing us.

God is just. He will punish evil. As both the Old and New Testament state, vengeance belongs to God and God alone. **We can trust God to see when we are wronged and trust him to handle it in his timing and his way.** If we choose to go on the attack to exact revenge on the opposition that comes our way, we put ourselves in the role of God because he's the only one who is righteous on his own and has the authority to punish evil. We also give the opposition the very thing they want, because while we are busy seeking vengeance, we're not busy fulfilling the work God has stirred us up to do.

In our hostile world, retribution is the growing response of choice when someone feels wronged. Social media is a weapon, the destruction of others' reputation is fair game, and physical violence appears to be on the rise. None of these should be viable options for the follower of Jesus. Instead, our response should be to give it to God. And as you let God handle what's God's to do...

You handle what's yours to do. As we engage our divine discontent, we must keep both a divine perspective and a human one. There are things only God can do, but he invites us to participate with him to accomplish what he calls us to do, even in the midst of opposition.

[Nehemiah 4:6-13] ⁶ So we built the wall. And all the wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work. ⁷ But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and that the breaches were beginning to be closed, they were very angry. ⁸ And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it. ⁹ And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night. ¹⁰ In Judah it was said, "The strength of those who bear the burdens is failing. There is too much rubble. By ourselves we will not be able to rebuild the wall." ¹¹ And our enemies said, "They will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work." ¹² At that time the Jews who lived near them came from all directions and said to us ten times, "You must return to us." ¹³ So in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, in open places, I stationed the people by their clans, with their swords, their spears, and their bows.

The growing opposition doesn't stop Nehemiah and the rest from making progress on the wall. They continue with their work and build it to half its height. The Christian life is not opposed to effort and the Church has historically thrived during times of opposition. While it is sometimes prudent to pray and wait or sit still, there are other times where praying and moving should be done simultaneously. Prayer asks God to do the things only God can do, but he has given us the capacity and opportunity to make a difference.

But progress produces attention. You start having an impact and people will notice. In fact, opposition shouldn't be viewed that something is going wrong. It's probably a good sign that something is going right! Sanballat and Tobiah are again enraged at the work on the wall, but this time they are not alone. New players like the Ashdodites and Arabs are introduced. That means Israel now has enemies on all sides. **Another goal of opposition is to get us to believe "I am all alone."** If you've ever felt isolated, like you were the only one carrying the banner for a cause or taking an unpopular stand for your beliefs, you know how demoralizing it can be. Israel's isolation also leaves them exposed and vulnerable. The players have conspired with one

another and are plotting to attack. While I pray, we would never experience this last one, it's important we know **the very real intent of opposition is for us to conclude "I am not safe."**

Nehemiah's response is to pray, prepare, and protect. Again, we see Nehemiah is a man of prayer, and this time it is corporate. They invite God to do what only God can do while Nehemiah makes adjustments by reallocating some of his men to be stationed as guards. He'll ultimately tell his people to work with one hand while holding a sword with another. He is preparing for war and protecting his people.

If opposition arrived at your doorstep today, how would you respond? We cannot face opposition alone. Prayer must be our reflexive response when opposition comes, and it must be followed up with faithful action on our part to adjust to it and protect our people. Thank our uniformed officers on the way out today. They are here for our protection should opposition arrive.

There are some other details I'm so glad Nehemiah included in this passage. It would have been very easy for him to say, "They opposed the work, but we got it done with no problem." Nehemiah gets real, and his authenticity and vulnerability is a blessing to us, because you know what he tells us? **Not only is opposition unavoidable, it's also effective.** It didn't stop the building of the wall, but it had a significant impact on the will of the people and on the way they worked.

Nehemiah's adjustments to arm his men and station some as guards meant less men were working on the wall, and they were doing it one-handed! I took a picture last Wednesday that I was so excited to show you this morning. This is from the City of David, and archaeologists have confirmed the middle section is the wall of Nehemiah. I show you this to show you the size and scope of the work. Those rocks are big and heavy, and it would take a lot of strength to move them with two hands. But also notice that Jerusalem doesn't sit on a flat plain. It's basically on the middle point of the shape of a "W". Building would be strenuous, and because of the strategic changes of putting men on guard duty, those left to do the work are growing exhausted. Ministry is hard work!

Not only that, friendly voices from within are starting to show doubt and fear. Nehemiah's fellow countrymen learn of the plot and beg them to abandon the city and return to their homes. The spirit and backs of the workers are breaking, and the confidence of the people is failing. The work of rebuilding the wall is teetering.

It would be foolish and prideful for us to believe that opposition as strong and severe as what Nehemiah faced would have no impact on us. If you begin to see your livelihood, your job, and social standing, or your safety threatened because of your work for God, it's going to make you think twice about staying the course. A passage like this should cause all of us to ask the question "What am I willing to endure for the cause of Christ?" For most of us, that question is likely theoretical right now because there's not a high price to pay for following Jesus. But it is wise for us to give it some thought now so that, when the day comes, we aren't caught flat-footed and unprepared. Jesus calls us to pick up our cross. I have no wish for any of us to face persecution and the threat of violence, but those are the realities faced by millions of Christians

around the world today, and it's likely to increase here. So, as you prayerfully consider what you are willing to endure for Christ, I want to close with the encouragement for you to...

Keep going, because God's in the middle of what he's called you to do. Opposition entices us to tap out, opt out, or get out. But if we choose any of those options, we'll miss out.

[Nehemiah 4:14-15, 20] ¹⁴ And I looked and arose and said to the nobles and to the officials and to 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 homes." ¹⁵ When our enemies heard that it was known to us and that God had frustrated their plan, we all returned to the wall, each to his work...²⁰ In the place where you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us."

When opposition arrives, we should greet it with prayer, preparation and protection, and perseverance. But **the only way we can keep going is by remembering the one who keeps us going**; his works, his Word, his faithfulness, and his power. He is great and awesome, he frustrates the plans of our enemy, and he will fight for us. Faith doesn't prevent us from seeing anything as a threat, faith means we believe God is greater than any threat.

The promise here is not that God will keep us from all opposition. It means he will sustain us through it and complete what he wants to complete. When we hang in there with God, he will finish the work he started in us and through us. On the eastern wall of the city of Jerusalem is the Lions Gate, but it's also known by another name; Stephens Gate. It's called that because it's believed this is the gate where the first martyr of the church, Stephen, was dragged through, out of the city, to be stoned to death. The divine discontent of Stephen to share the good news of the Gospel with his fellow Jews did not end in failure, but in completion. When opposition comes, remember the character of God and the promise he gives to all who would seek to follow him: I will be with you.

I want to close this morning with what I believe is a wonderful illustration of what we read this morning. We are baptizing eleven people today. While it's not exactly the same as building a wall, it is a public sign that these people are all in with Jesus. Just like the wall was a clear indication that Nehemiah was all in with God, going public with our faith is a clear indication we are followers of Christ. It's also potentially a marker that informs those who are opposed to God that you are now a target. But the God whose death, caused by opposition, and resurrection we associate ourselves with in baptism is the same one who will judge evil in the end, hear our prayers when we cry out to him, and sustain us when difficulty comes and we are ready to quit. He is great and awesome, and he will fight for us. So candidates, as you enter the waters of baptism this morning, remember that's the God you proclaim to follow today.