

The Joy of Opposition

Nehemiah 4

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Today we are going to stay in the stream of 1 Peter's teaching about trials, but look at one particularly painful kind of trial. This will give us a little break from 1 Peter with an Old Testament narrative and example. My title is *The Joy of Opposition*. That sounds like a contradiction in terms. Who takes joy in opposition? Yet with a sovereign God who promises to use all things for good—even the cross of Christ—the opposition we face can be seen as turning out for good.

We all face opposition at times. Perhaps names come to your mind. How should we respond to opposition and conflict, especially when it opposes what we know God wants us to do? Let's look at how Nehemiah handled opposition.

Nehemiah served King Artaxerxes who was the King of Persia and he hears that Jerusalem is still in ruins, the wall is still in ruins, and he has a burden for that. He offers a prayer and God blesses that prayer and King Artaxerxes tells Nehemiah that he can go and that he will fund it and he gave him a letter that would get him all the way there. He was the most powerful man in the world at that time so that was a huge endorsement. So Nehemiah goes to Jerusalem and he inspects the walls and gathers the Jews and says, "Let's rebuild the wall!" And they start building and they make amazing progress. But in the midst of all this success, there is chapter 4 where there is trouble.

It seems to me, and it's been my experience, that whenever God is really doing something—whether that be in the life of a new Christian or in your church or a mission work—something will happen; there will be some sort of criticism or someone steps into that situation and can so easily derail the entire thing. And that's what Nehemiah faced.

The Strategies of Opposition (Nehemiah 4)

Nehemiah 4 centers on three notorious scoundrels, Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem. These three men and the kingdoms they represent come together to oppose Nehemiah, the Jews, and the rebuilding of the wall. We are introduced to them in chapter 2. When they hear that Nehemiah has come to help the Jews they are greatly displeased. They wage a psychological war against Nehemiah that continues throughout the story. Later they seek to assassinate his character with an open letter and then scheme to take his life.

Sanballat was the ringleader, Tobiah was his sidekick, and Geshem was the behind-the-scenes schemer. Perhaps this will help: Sanballat was the Sith Lord, Tobiah was Darth Vader, and Geshem was General Grievous. Together their kingdoms surrounded Jerusalem; Sanballat to the north, Tobiah to the east, and Geshem to the south. Nehemiah and the Jewish people are completely surrounded by people who hated him and his work.

These men couldn't directly attack Nehemiah because Artaxerxes, the king of Persia, had okayed the project. They had to take a more subtle approach, a cloak and dagger strategy. This will sound familiar as human nature hasn't changed much. Satan's strategy hasn't either.

Taunts (Verses 1-3)

"Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews. 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?' 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!'" (Nehemiah 4:1-3 ESV)

Sanballat, the ringleader, hears about the progress on the wall and he becomes angry. Lit, his nose becomes hot. He is mad. So he gathers his cronies and armies around him and loudly begins to taunt and ridicule the wall-building Jews.

Like fights beginning on the schoolyard, mockery is the most basic of criticism; it needs no proof or documentation or really logic at all.

- Name calling: *"Feeble Jews!" (Wimps!)*
- Deride their ambition: *Will they restore their wall? (The whole project is a joke!)*
- Ridicule their optimism: *What are they going to do, pray the wall up?*
- Mock their enthusiasm: *Will they finish in a day? (Sure they're busy little beavers; they're working like they think they can do it in a day!)*
- Undermine their confidence: *Can they bring the stones back to life? (They can't do it!)*

After each question, there was laughter. Now, have you ever seen it when one person has told some good jokes and someone tries to jump on the bandwagon and get a good one in and it falls flat? Tobiah says, *"Yes...if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall!"* (Verse 3) (Oh Tobiah...) Archaeology has revealed these walls to be nine feet thick. It'd have to be a really big fox, Tobiah.

The Jews heard what was being said. The old schoolyard adage, *Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me!* really isn't true. Words are powerful. Why did Sanballat begin with ridicule? There's no easier way to stop something than to discourage those involved. Our enemy Satan knows this. He doesn't have to get a Christian to deny the faith if only he can just discourage him.

How should we respond? Nehemiah responds with a prayer in verse 4 and verse 6. Then he adds, the people kept working because *"they had a mind to work."* Sometimes the best response to opposition is to just put your head down and work. As an aside, I see this quality at work in our church. In big event work like our Gary facility cleanup day last year or even our recent gym floor projects, when Bethel goes to work it's amazing to watch. It's also true in the steady work of ministry week-to-week. I am so proud of the working spirit of the servants of our church. See yourselves in verse 6, you have a mind to work.

Troublemaking (Verses 7-8)

"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. And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it." (Nehemiah 4:7-8)

The second form that opposition will often take is to make trouble. To do mischief. To gossip against you. To slander you. To use whatever means possible to create trouble for you. It's verbal terrorism. God's enemies do this because their Sith Lord is described as "the Father of lies." Satan is the master of whispers and insinuation. Nehemiah's enemies plotted trouble.

Nehemiah's response is in verse 9, *"And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night."*

That little phrase shows the balancing tension between trusting in the sovereignty of God and taking prudent steps. It is easy to err on either side. You might say, "We're just going to pray about it; we have no need for a guard," or "We're taking matters into our own hands. We're setting up a guard, and then we don't need to pray." Faith trusts God, but faith also must operate in the real world. I have known situations where someone has gotten cancer and said, "I'm only going to pray." I have urged getting medical attention as well.

A better example is some weeks ago a dear woman in our church had a difficult surgery. Before the surgery we had a prayer meeting with the elders. She was anointed with oil and prayed over. Then she went and had the surgery. Faith prays, but faith also takes prudent and wise steps. We see Nehemiah doing the same.

Threats (Verses 11-12)

"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 came and told us ten times over, 'Wherever you turn, they will attack us.'" (Nehemiah 4:11-12 NIV)

The Sith Lord spread word through back channels, *we're going to sneak up on them and before they know it, we will be among them, killing them.* As intended, word of this got out and the Jews who were aligned with these bad guys came and told the good guys working on the wall, *Listen to what we heard: wherever you turn they're going to attack you.* Notice they said this over and over. If you hear something enough, you believe it to be true.

The Effect of Opposition ⇒ Discouragement

"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.'" (Nehemiah 4:10 ESV)

These words and attacks were having their effect in spite of the amazing progress they had made. They were already halfway done with the wall! Incredible progress. No one ever thought they would get this far. They had momentum. But then the attacks came.

The danger in verbal attacks is that you begin to believe what they are telling you. Most attacks have a small element of truth from which false accusations are developed. The little truth is just believable enough that the rest seems plausible. Building this wall was a huge endeavor. They did need prayer. There were heaps of rubble. Part of their ridicule was correct, but the conclusions were entirely wrong.

Have you lived in verse 10? Have you had your face flush as your neighbor or family member or colleague speaks venom to you? As a church leader for quite a few years now, I have lived this all too often. The result is too many days living in verse 10, *What's the point? I'm never going to make it. I really am a failure because this person says I am.*

I don't want to ruin the ending, but they rebuilt the wall in only 52 days. They're halfway done! Only three weeks before they had shouted with Nehemiah, *Let us start rebuilding!*

It goes down as one of the greatest team efforts in history. Yet, it was still criticized. Mocked. And herein lies the danger of criticism, it can sap the energy from the most spiritual and noble of efforts. They were rebuilding this wall to the glory of God. God had so obviously moved to bring this about (King Artaxerxes changed his edict, gave permission, and footed the bill for the whole effort). They knew that they were squarely in God's will. And yet when

criticism comes, even great and inspiring causes can be brought to a halt. It was tough for Nehemiah. Opposition outside the ranks and discouragement within. Here is where Nehemiah gives us the key to turning opposition upside down and seeing it as an occasion for joy.

Four Ways to Turn Opposition into Joy

1. Expect it

Anyone who steps into a position of responsibility in any organization and on any level, must be prepared to pay the price of opposition. "No leader is exempt from criticism, and his humility will nowhere be seen more clearly than in the manner in which he accepts and reacts to it." (J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership*, p. 110) Do you think that Nehemiah expected to show up, say a few words, build the wall, and get back to Susa without so much as a hitch?

"There will always, always be opposition from those who are, by nature, negative and critical. But the work must go on. Progress should not stop because a few were critical of the plan." (Charles Swindoll, *Hand Me Another Brick*) It is a falsely idealistic view of ministry and life to think that it will be without conflict. Nehemiah faced it, Jeremiah faced it, Paul faced it, Jesus faced it, and the early church faced it. We are naive to think that a church or any organization that involves people will be free from it. In fact, there is a key truth here, **God's will didn't allow the wall to be built without opposition!**

Could God have built that wall without any Sanballats? Sure he could. But within his will for Nehemiah and the people building the wall was Sanballat and Tobiah **and** the conflict, slander, and threats they made.

Might you have a Sanballat in your life right now? Are you living with the consequences of a Tobiah? Might God have placed Sanballat there for your good and even for your joy? This is 1 Peter's point with all trials. While painful, they are good because of their effect. The pain isn't good, but what the pain reveals and refines in us is good. Therefore, embrace the trial.

Too often when criticism comes, we think we must be out of God's will because Mrs. So and So doesn't seem to be on board. *So and so said such and such about our this or that; we must be displeasing God!* Joe Stowell once said, "In every church I have pastored, God has placed difficult people around me to keep me dependent on Him." Opposition is not *out* of God's will, it's a *part* of God's will. Look at the life and death of Jesus and ask, is opposition part of God's will? The greater the potential for God to be glorified, the greater the expectation we can have for opposition to it.

If I might make a small tangent at this point, you may be here and in an honest evaluation, you're not Nehemiah in the story, you tend to be Sanballat. You find yourself regularly at the center of controversy or you thrive on conflict. **While it is God's will for there to be Sanballats, it is never God's will for us to be a Sanballat.** Why was Sanballat so concerned about the wall? Was it the wall or because Nehemiah represented a threat to him? Was it the wall or his finances? His power? Conflict unveils the idols and real motives of the heart. Sanballats are on full display. Don't be a Sanballat.

2. Pray for it

Look at what Nehemiah does. "*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.*" (Nehemiah 4:4) What's Nehemiah's strategy? He prays! He prays a strong prayer here asking God to turn their evil back on them. The point is that Nehemiah took the matter to God. And he didn't just do it in verse 4. In verses 6-8 comes the troublemaking and scheming. What

does Nehemiah do? *"And we prayed to our God."* (Verse 9) When we face opposition that has been sovereignly brought to us by God, we must believe that God has the power to overcome it. Ask him to do so.

Trouble comes and Nehemiah's on his knees in prayer. We see the same thing with our Lord Jesus. In fact, what was the last thing he did before facing the scourging and the beating, the betrayal and false accusations; what did he do on the cross itself? He prayed at Gethsemane. He prayed on the cross. His last words were prayers.

Do you do that? Do you lay that critical person before God and say, *Okay God, here it is. I believe that I am doing your work and here is opposition, please help!* I find that when I do that, it makes me more charitable even toward my perceived enemy. It makes me a little more open to even loving my enemy as Scripture and Jesus' example calls me to do. I see them as God's tool in my life rather than my enemy. With that, comes a glimmer of joy.

3. Prepare for it

Notice that Nehemiah didn't simply pray, he took actions to meet the opposition:

- *"And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them."* (Verse 9)
- Verse 13 describes how Nehemiah armed the workers so they could respond to an attack.
- He put armed guards at the low spots in the wall (Verses 12-15)
- He had the workers work with a chisel in one hand and a sword in the other. (Verses 16-18)
- He brought a trumpeter with him so that if an attack came, people could rush to the spot of attack. (Verses 18-20)
- He had the people stay inside the city until the wall was done (Verse 22).

We certainly should expect opposition and pray for those who oppose us. This also tells us to be prudent and wise in preparing and responding to it.

After we have prayed, and after we have prepared, joy comes because of this fourth and final point.

4. Fear not, God will fight it

*"And I said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, 'The work is great and widely spread, and we are separated on the wall, far from one another. In the place where you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. **Our God will fight for us.**'"* (Nehemiah 4:19-20, emphasis added)

In both of these cases, Nehemiah turns the peoples' attention, not to his preparations, or his leadership, or their ability to fight, but to the God of heaven who is "great and awesome" and who is the "God who will fight for us."

Herein lies the key to turning opposition into joy. When we recognize that the Sanballats and Tobiahs that rise against us are sovereignly placed in our paths by God himself, and that the crisis which they bring will always work out for our good (Romans 8:28), then there is a source of joy to look into their faces (snarls and all) and to realize, *My God will fight for me!*

Friends, expect it, pray for it, prepare for it, but do not fear the opposition that will come, *"If God is for us, who can be against us?"* (Romans 8:31) The echo of that truth, is joy. And that is the joy of opposition.

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