

GC2 Press® Premium Commentary for Kingdom Assignment: The Relentless Pursuit of Obedience (A Study of Nehemiah) By Dr. Jeff Gravens, Pastor, First Baptist Church, Sulphur Springs, Texas

Lesson 5: Overcoming the Enemy

Focal text: Nehemiah 4:1-8

Background: Nehemiah 4:1-23

MAIN IDEA: All leaders face opposition when they challenge the status quo.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE: What do we learn from Nehemiah about responding to criticism?

QUICK READ: Nehemiah was not dissuaded when he faced furious opposition.

INTRODUCTION

William Carey suffered innumerable hardships during his missionary career. In later years he shared his secret with his nephew. Disclaiming every other gift, he said, “I can plod. That is my only genius. I can persevere in any definite pursuit. To this I owe everything.”¹

Character is revealed by opposition. Nehemiah responded to opposition with godly character and leadership. Nehemiah 4 describes both the attempts of the opposition to halt the rebuilding of the wall and the perseverance of the people. Nehemiah plodded forward in his kingdom assignment.

COMMENTARY

Kingdom Interrogation (Nehemiah 4:1-3)

Sanballot opposed Nehemiah because he knew that a rebuilt and restored Jerusalem would result in a decrease in his power and influence. Giving up power is rarely popular. Rare is the proclamation of John the Baptist, “He must increase, but I must decrease (John 3:30).” Nehemiah heard the report of the broken walls of Jerusalem and wept and prayed. When Sanballot heard the news of the rebuilding of the walls, he “became angered and was greatly incensed” (4:1). Anger revealed Sanballot’s heart and opposition to the work of God. His anger manifested in ridicule.

¹ S.P. Carey, *William Carey* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1923), 23.

Sanballot's ridicule came in the form of an interrogation. He posed a string of rhetorical questions to the Jews in the presence of his associates (4:2). His questions intended to sow seeds of further and greater opposition.

Sanballot's five questions sought to demoralize the workers. He asked, "What are these feeble Jews doing? His reference to "feeble Jews" was likely an assessment of the weakened state of the workers after years in exile. "Will they restore the wall?" was a reference to the large task attempted by such weak people. "Will they offer sacrifices?" was reference to the religious practices of the "feeble Jews" who relied upon God for help. "Will they finish in a day?" was a satirical question likely pointed at the workers quick pace and determination. "Can they bring stones back to life?" was a reminder of previous defeat and the enormous task ahead. Tobiah joined the ridicule party. He took Sanballot's rhetorical questions and took the argument to the absurd claiming a small wind or a fox could bring the walls down (4:3).

Those who oppose God's work are blinded to the strength of God and the ability of God's people.

Kingdom Response (Nehemiah 4:4-5)

The words of Sanballot and Tobiah somehow reached Nehemiah. How did he respond? In the face of opposition, Nehemiah once again proved himself to be a man of prayer. Rather than address Sanballot and Tobiah, Nehemiah addressed God:

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).

Prayer is a frontline defense against opposition. Nehemiah viewed rebuilding the wall as a kingdom assignment. Thus, opposition was ultimately waged against God. That detail places this opposition firmly into the category of spiritual warfare. Ephesians 6:10-12 tells us,

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

Nehemiah had confidence in God. His confidence was derived from a significant season spent in prayer. He did not doubt God's ability to accomplish His will. When faced with opposition, he prayed. When faced with enemies and adversaries, he placed his trust in God.

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The result of Nehemiah's prayer was remarkable: "So we rebuilt the wall" and "the people worked with all their heart (Nehemiah 4:6)." Nehemiah's confidence in God rallied the workers. What a beautiful description of cooperation. Psalm 133:1 says, "How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!"

External Escalation (Nehemiah 4:7-9)

When "Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, and Ammonites and the people of Ashdod" heard that the workers continued the repair of the walls they grew "very angry" and "plotted together to fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it" (4:8). Once they realized the smear campaign did not achieve the desired result, the opposition escalated their efforts. This highlights an important principle: prayer and faithfulness does not guarantee that opposition will cease. At the same time, increased opposition is not a signal that faithfulness is useless, or God is unhelpful. Rather, increased opposition requires more prayer and greater reliance upon the strength and wisdom of God. Our fervency in prayer should at least match the fervency of the opposition. This keeps us dependent upon God and opens our eyes to God's work.

In the face of escalating opposition, Nehemiah once again turned to prayer. He led the people to pray to God for help. After prayer, a plan was put in place. Nehemiah "posted a guard day and night to meet this threat (4:9)."

Internal Problems (Nehemiah 4:10-15)

In verse 10 the people in Judah said, "The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much trouble that we cannot rebuild the wall." This appears to be a statement of weariness from the workers. They had removed fragments of the destroyed wall and were rebuilding the wall anew. They spent time away from their family and did hard work in the face of threats. The people quote the enemies in verse 11, "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." In verse 12 the message "Wherever you turn, they will attack us" was delivered ten times over.

The laborers were physically, emotionally, and mentally exhausted. The kingdom assignment came with a heavy toll. The Apostle Paul encouraged the church in Galatia by saying, "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up (Galatians 6:9)." Aware of the problems, Nehemiah put a plan place which illustrates his strategic genius, compassion for the people, and confidence in God Almighty.

He pulled people away from rebuilding, grouped the workers by families at low points in the wall, and armed them with weapons. Yet, he did not place trust in the swords and spears but the Lord: “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 families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes (Nehemiah 4:14).”

Nehemiah provided two powerful exhortations. First, he said, “Do not be afraid.” The “do not be afraid” exhortation is found throughout the Old Testament: Deuteronomy 3:22; 7:21; 31:6; Joshua 1:9; Psalm 27:1; 34:7; Isaiah 35:4; 41:10; Zephaniah 3:17. Humans are riddled with fear, but the Lord has the power and desire to calm all fears. Second, he said “Remember the Lord.” Nehemiah was not asking the people to trust in people or weapons, but in God. He called them to trust the God who revealed Himself to be Creator, Sustainer, Provider, and Redeemer.

Along with the exhortations, Nehemiah’s plan first stationed people in the exposed places in the wall. This removed the ability of potential attackers to slip in as they had threatened to do. Nehemiah’s plan also stationed people with their families. This provided the workers with an even greater incentive to fight. It is one thing to fight for strangers; it is another to fight for one’s family.²

The opposition got word of the plan, and the threat dissipated. Nehemiah framed the dissipation as the enemies realizing God frustrated their plan, “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 our own work (4:15).” Nehemiah and the opposition saw the hand of God at work. After God provided yet again, the people went back to work.

Protection from Future Threats (Nehemiah 4:16-23)

Verses 16-23 detail the measures Nehemiah and the workers took to protect themselves from future threats.

They Took Up Arms. While half of the men worked, the other half were equipped with spears, shield, bows, and armor (9:16). The threat was met with adequate precautions.

They Created an Alarm System. A man with a trumpet stayed with Nehemiah. When a threat was perceived, the trumpet was to blow, “Wherever you hear the sound of the

² TJ Betts, *Nehemiah: A Pastoral and Exegetical Commentary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020), 77.

trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us (9:20)!” Even with arms and an alarm, Nehemiah was confident that God was the one at work.

They Remained Alert. The people realized the threat and remained vigilant: “Neither I nor my brothers nor the guards with me took off our clothes; each had his weapon, even when he went for water (9:23).”

These protection measures show that one can both trust the Lord and put tangible plans into place. Nehemiah’s leadership called people to both trust the Lord and act.

Excurses on Imprecatory Prayers (Nehemiah 4:4-5)

Nehemiah's prayer for vengeance against his enemies clearly belongs in the same category as the imprecatory psalms (See Psalms 35, 58, 59, 69, 109, 137). It is common for Christians to be uncomfortable or embarrassed by prayers regarding the harm of enemies. These frequent biblical prayers are worthy of deeper reflection.

It is easy to see imprecatory prayers as direct contradiction to Jesus’ call for us to love our enemies. Yet, imprecatory prayers ultimately call for God to vindicate Himself. In many cases, the imprecatory prayers are voiced by a righteous petitioner who has been mistreated due to faithfulness to God. The prayer is for God's name to be cleared and glorified.

The imprecatory prayers also provide a helpful model of not taking vengeance into our own hands but leaving vengeance to God. Romans 12:19 says, “Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord.” D. Kinder explains that in the Old Testament imprecations “horror may be piled on horror more to express the speaker’s sense of outrage than to spell out the penalties he literally intends.”³ In the prayers of the Bible we find honest communication from the people of God. They do not clean up their language and hide emotions. Rather, they freely call out to the God who hears. God can handle honest communication.

Our uncomfortableness with imprecatory prayers likely stems from the exhortation from the Bible to love more. Yet, there are things believers should hate. We should hate sin and its consequences. We should hate anything that opposes God, His glory, and His character.⁴

³ D Kinder, *Psalms 1-72* (London: Intervarsity Press, 1973), 27.

⁴ TJ Betts, *Nehemiah: A Pastoral and Exegetical Commentary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020), 71.

CONCLUSION

In the conclusion of Lesson 3, I quoted Tod Bolsinger's remarks on sabotage. He refers to sabotage as the act of anxious people every time a leader takes initiative to start a change process. Bolsinger credits sabotage as the frequent cause of a leader's failure of nerve or failure of heart. Failure of nerve is caving to the pressure of the anxiety of the group to return to the status quo. Failure of heart is the "emotional cutoff" that occurs when the leader's discouragement leads them to psychologically abandon their people and the charge they have been given.⁵

Bolsinger credits resilience in the face of sabotage as the antidote to the leader's failure of nerve and failure of heart.⁶ Resilience for faith leaders is the ability to wisely persevere toward the mission God has put before them amid both the external challenges and the internal resistance of the leader's followers.⁷

In Nehemiah 4, Nehemiah is confronted with external and internal resistance. It provides a case study in resilience as an antidote to failure of nerve and failure of heart.

⁵ Tod Bolsinger, *Tempered Resilience: How Leaders are Formed in the Crucible of Change* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2020), 29.

⁶ Ibid, 29.

⁷ Ibid., 35.