RESPONDING TO OPPOSITION

Nehemiah 4:1-23

By

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When Igor Sikorsky was 12, his parents told him that competent authorities had already proved human flight impossible. He went on to build the first helicopter. In his American plant, he posted this sign:

According to recognized aerotechnical tests, the bumblebee cannot fly because of the shape and weight of his body in relation to the total wing area. The bumblebee does not know this, so he goes ahead and flies anyway (Encyclopedia of 7,700 Illustrations, by Paul Lee Tan [Assurance Publishers], p. 945).

Nehemiah would have loved that sign! His story shows that whenever you try to accomplish anything significant for the Lord, you will face strong opposition. Satan never bothers with half-hearted people who are content with a ho-hum spiritual existence. But if you come on fire for Christ, look out! The name “Satan” means “adversary”; he is committed to opposing God and His people, especially when they are zealous to exalt God’s glory.

This is true on the personal level. As long as you live with one foot in the world, living according to the world’s values and for the world’s goals, Satan won’t trouble you. You can go to church and even pray and read your Bible, and he won’t mind. But the minute you wake up from your spiritual lethargy, shake off the worldly mindset, and commit yourself to radical obedience to Jesus Christ, you will encounter spiritual opposition!

This also applies to churches and church leaders: Whenever godly leaders attempt to rally God’s people to advance His kingdom, opposition will hit. Satan doesn’t mind when churches gather to sing and to hear soothing sermons about how to use the Bible to achieve personal success. Those churches are no threat to his domain of darkness. But when a pastor preaches the gospel that convicts sinners of their sin in the presence of a holy God and points them to the cross of Jesus Christ, look out! When a pastor calls the flock to obedient, holy living in this wicked world, look out! When
a pastor directs the vision of the flock toward the unreached nations who are waiting to hear the gospel, look out! The enemy is committed to opposing that kind of work. We need to be ready for such opposition and know how to respond to it. Nehemiah 4 teaches us that ...

When the enemy opposes us as he surely will, we should respond with prayer, work, vigilance, and focus on the Lord.

If we only had chapter 3, we would get the impression that the work on the wall went without a snag. "So-and-so built this gate, and these people built the wall to this point, and next to them, these people built the wall further, etc." It sounds as if there were no problems. But such was not the case. It never is. Chapters 4-6 show us some of the problems that had to be overcome in the process of rebuilding the wall. There is a cycle of advance and setback through chapters 3-6:

Chapter 3: Advance 4:1-3: Setback
4:4-6: Advance 4:7-8: Setback
4:9: Advance 4:10-12: Setback
5:7-19: Advance 6:1-14: Attempted setback
6:15-16: Final advance 6:17-19: Attempted setback

This cycle shows that the Christian life is a conflict. There will always be opposition. The enemy will try to get you sidetracked or to give up completely. Even though it was God’s will for the wall to be rebuilt, He did not remove the opposition. Even though it is God’s will for you to grow strong in faith and to labor to advance His kingdom, God does not remove the opposition. If you respond properly, the opposition will drive you to greater dependence on the Lord and to greater determination to do what He has called you to do. If you yield to the opposition, you will quit the race in discouragement or settle in for a mediocre Christian existence.

The first defense against the enemy is to be aware of the kinds of opposition that he uses. We will look first at the various forms the opposition takes and then at how we are to respond.

1. If you know Jesus Christ and attempt to accomplish anything for Him, the enemy will oppose you.

Our text reveals at least six types of opposition:
(1) The anger of others against you.

Sanballat, the governor of Samaria, became furious and very angry (4:1, 7). The Hebrew word means “burning mad.” A secure and independent Jerusalem would threaten his hold on the area and undermine his control of the trade route through the region, thus hurting his economy. So for the time being, he dropped his differences with the Ammonites to the east, the Arabs to the south, and the Philistines to the west. In anger over what Nehemiah was doing they all came together, threatening to stop the work by violence if necessary. This new work of God in Jerusalem threatened their lifestyle, and so they got angry.

Satan often uses the anger of others to try to squelch the newfound joy and zeal of a new believer. Suppose that a teenager who grew up in a culturally religious home, where the gospel was never preached, gets saved. He goes home and joyously tells his parents how he has met Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Are they overjoyed? Hardly! They explode: “What do you mean that you’ve become a Christian? How do you think we raised you? As a heathen? What’s all this nonsense about being born again?”

Why are they mad? You’d think they would be glad that their kid wasn’t doing drugs or getting girls pregnant. They’re mad because if their kid gets serious about God, it threatens their worldly, self-centered lifestyle. The same thing happens when a wife meets Christ. Her zeal for God convicts her husband of his wicked ways, and he responds with anger. Satan’s aim is to get the new Christian to cool his commitment to the Lord. If anger doesn’t stop the work, Satan hauls out another tool:

(2) Mockery and sarcasm.

Sanballat and his buddies gather within hearing distance of the wall and ask a bunch of sarcastic questions (4:2): “What are those feeble Jews doing? Are they going to restore it for themselves? Can they offer sacrifices?” He means, “Do they think that they can complete this project and offer sacrifices of thanksgiving?” “Can they finish in a day? Can they revive the stones from the dusty rubble, even the burned ones?” After each rhetorical question, his cronies probably roared with laughter. Then Tobiah threw in his sar-
castic barb, “if a fox should jump on [this poor excuse for a wall], he would break [it] down.”

Satan frequently uses ridicule against those who take a stand for the Lord. If you become a Christian and let it be known, your fellow workers will mock you and call you a holy Joe. They will be waiting for you to fall into some sin, so that they can hoot about it: “We knew you were no different. Christians are a bunch of hypocrites!” Your commitment to Christ threatens their godless lifestyle.

(3) Threats and intimidation.

If anger and ridicule don’t work, the enemy gets more aggressive. Nehemiah’s enemies had to be careful, since he was working under Artaxerxes’ permission. They couldn’t just rally their troops and march on Jerusalem, or they would be charged with rebellion against the king. But they could and did use threats of violence (4:8, 11), which they circulated among the Jews living near them (4:12). Small bands of terrorists could sneak in and pick off a few of the people working on the wall, and Sanballat would just tell Artaxerxes that it was a renegade band that he didn’t have control over. So, like the militant Muslims today, the threat of terrorist activity put the Jews under immense psychological pressure.

Satan still uses subtle or overt threats and intimidation to oppose Christians. “If you don’t keep quiet about the boss’s corruption, you’ll get fired.” “If you discipline your children as Scripture directs, the authorities will take them away from you.” “If you write a paper in defense of the Christian faith, the professor will flunk you.” Years ago, an evangelical church in Phoenix had a powerful attorney on the elder board who was having an affair. When they confronted him and told him to step down from the board, he threatened them with a lawsuit that would bankrupt the church with legal fees, even if they won. He finally agreed to step down if all the elders resigned along with him. Sadly, the church capitulated to his threats!

(4) Discouragement and exhaustion.

Apparently there was a discouraging proverb or work song that circulated among the workers at this point (4:10): “The strength of the burden bearers is failing, yet there is much rubbish; and we ourselves are unable to rebuild the wall.” The people were
wearing out and the piles of rubbish didn’t seem to be diminishing. They had lost their earlier heart for the work that had resulted in the wall rapidly being built to the halfway mark (4:6).

Satan knows that the halfway point in any work is the most effective time to strike. When a new project begins, there is plenty of enthusiasm. “Let’s arise and build! Let’s do it!” If you get over the midway hump and see the completion drawing near, there is another surge of enthusiasm. “We’re almost there! Let’s get it done!” But right in the middle of things, exhaustion and discouragement set in. People have lost the initial zeal and all they can see are the piles of rubble still waiting to be removed. They feel like quitting.

The same thing is true in your walk with God. When you first get on fire for the Lord, it’s exciting. “We’re going to win the world for Christ!” Every Bible study you go to seems fresh and challenging. Your times in the Word and in prayer are rich with new discoveries. You just can’t get enough of it. But somewhere down the line, the newness wears off. You begin to notice the piles of rubble in your own life and in the church, problems and sins that just don’t seem to go away. You begin to grow weary, wondering if all your efforts are making any difference for the cause of Christ. Your weariness leads you to discouragement. But Satan isn’t out of tools.

(5) Negativism.

The criticism and mockery (in 4:2-3) came from the enemy without. This negativism came from the Jews themselves who lived near the enemy (4:12). These people were not involved in the work of rebuilding the wall. That is significant! They lived near the enemy, and thus were constantly exposed to his negative attacks on the work. And, they weren’t involved personally in the work. So they were hearing negative reports and threats and they didn’t know firsthand what God was doing in Jerusalem. They came repeatedly (“ten times” is a Hebrew expression meaning “over and over”) to warn Nehemiah and those working on the wall, “They will come up against us from every place where you may turn.”

Invariably, negativism in the church comes from professing Christians who live near the enemy and are not involved in the Lord’s work. Such negativism is the enemy of faith. “There are giants in the land. We were like grasshoppers in their sight. There’s
no way that we can take the land" (see Num. 13:28-29, 31-33). There is a proper place for realism. Nehemiah didn’t ignore the very real danger that existed. But if he had listened to these prophets of doom, he never would have finished the wall.

(6) Fear.

Fear is the cumulative effect of all of the above factors (4:14). The people had seen the enemy’s anger and had heard their mockery and threats. They were wearing down through exhaustion. Then they repeatedly heard gloom and doom from their fellow Jews who lived near the enemy. Nehemiah saw their fear and exhorted them not to be afraid.

Satan uses fear to paralyze God’s people and keep them from attempting anything significant for the Lord. Maybe it’s a fear of failure. You’ve never done it before, and you don’t know if you can do it. Maybe it’s a fear of rejection. If you try it, others will think you’re a fanatic and stand off from you. It may be a fear of conflict. If you do what God wants you to do, you know that you’ll catch flak. So, you back off.

These are some of the tactics that Satan uses to oppose God’s work both in projects that people undertake in advancing the Lord’s work and in individual hearts that want to advance spiritually. How should we respond to such opposition?

2. Respond to the enemy’s opposition with prayer, work, vigilance, and focus on the Lord.

Whenever you encounter opposition, you have several options. You can run from it; you can try to dodge it or go around it; you can try to work out a compromise; or, you can meet it head on and work through it. The last approach is usually the only biblical way. Nehemiah’s approach can be broken down into four aspects: They lifted their voices in prayer; they put their hearts into the work; they kept their eyes on the enemy in vigilance; and, they kept their minds focused on the Lord in faith.

(1) They lifted their voices in prayer.

Often when we face opposition, our first response is to get angry and hit back or defend ourselves. But our first response should always be prayer (4:4, 9). John Bunyan wisely observed,
“You can do more than pray after you have prayed, but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed” (source unknown). Prayer reminds us that God is sovereign, even over those who are attacking us. He has allowed this trial for a reason. In prayer we submit our hearts to Him and acknowledge our trust in Him.

But what about Nehemiah’s prayer in 4:4-5? It doesn’t seem to fit with, “Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:44)! Should we pray as Nehemiah prayed?

I must be brief (for more, see www.fcfonline.org, my sermon on Psalm 137 [10/24/93]; also, see James Adams, War Psalms of the Prince of Peace [Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing], 1991). First, this is not a prayer for personal vengeance, but rather a prayer that God would act to judge sinners. Second, since these enemies were hindering God’s work, it was a prayer that God would judge those who oppose His kingdom and glory. Third, to pray for God’s kingdom to be established (as in the Lord’s Prayer) is implicitly, if not explicitly, to pray for all competing kingdoms to be destroyed (Adams, p. 52). As Christians, we should pray that God would “destroy” our enemies by converting them. But if He so chooses, God may also destroy them by pouring out His wrath on them, as He will surely do at the final judgment if they have not repented of their rebellion against Him.

We need to guard our hearts against any selfish motives or personal delight in seeing our enemies brought down. But we must also remember that the saints will rejoice when God finally judges the wicked (Rev. 18:20). If our hearts are right, we can pray that God would subdue the enemies of the cross, either by conversion or by His justice. Prayer should be our first response to opposition.

(2) They put their hearts into the work.

“The people had a heart [lit.] to work” (4:6). Although there was a slight pause while Nehemiah organized the militia, they didn’t abandon the work to chase down the enemy. They didn’t allow the enemy’s threat to get their focus onto other issues. They just kept building the wall, and pretty soon the enemy was outside looking up, instead of looking straight across at them over the wall.

There are times when it is necessary to refute false teachers and defend sound doctrine. In fact, this is one of the tasks of the
elders (Titus 1:9-16). But we should never get so distracted by fighting false teachers that we forget our main purpose, which is to proclaim the gospel both here and around the world through missions. Both the sword and the trowel are necessary, but the reason for the sword is so that we can use the trowel. We defend the faith with the sword of God’s Word so that we can build His kingdom with the trowel. To get sidetracked onto defending the faith to the neglect of winning and building people is to forget our goal.

(3) They kept their eyes on the enemy in vigilance.

Nehemiah prayed first, but then he set up a guard. “Trust God and keep your powder dry!” Also, notice that Nehemiah’s prayer did not make the enemy go away; instead, the enemy upped the threats to attack! Prayer isn’t a magic cure-all. Prayer doesn’t mean that you can ignore the enemy’s threats or pretend that they don’t exist. Nehemiah was vigilant to arm the workers and post guards around the clock. Also, he put into place a warning system, so that wherever the trumpet was blown, the workers would quickly rally there to defend their families and the city. The workers didn’t take off their clothes at night so that they would be ready to defend the city. Vigilance!

If a report came to us during church that a dangerous lion had escaped in this neighborhood, would you stroll out to your car in normal fashion? Would you let your kids run loose outside? Of course not! You would arm yourself and be on guard constantly for fear of that lion on the loose.

Yet many Christians are oblivious to the dangers that come from our adversary the devil, who prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking to devour us (1 Pet. 5:8). They go out into the world without putting on the full armor of God (Eph. 6:10-20). They hang out with worldly friends and fill their minds with the crud of Hollywood. They let their kids watch the trash on TV, and after the kids are in bed, the parents tune in the shows for “mature” audiences—mature in evil, but not in godliness! And then they wonder why they have family problems!

If you don’t want to fall victim to the enemy, you’ve got to set up a defense against him in advance. Block the opportunities for moral filth from your life and home. Spend time each day saturat-
ing your mind with God’s Word. Have a network of brothers and sisters in the Lord whom you can rally to when the enemy attacks. To be oblivious to the enemy is to be vulnerable.

Nehemiah and his people responded to the enemy’s opposition by lifting their voices in prayer, putting their hearts into the work, and by vigilantly keeping their eyes on the enemy. Finally,

(4) They kept their minds focused on the Lord.

Nehemiah reminded them (4:14), “Remember the Lord who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives and your houses.” The people were discouraged because they had gotten their focus onto the enemy’s threats, the piles of rubble, and all the work left to do. Nehemiah rightly directed their focus back to the Lord who is great and awesome and to the things that were at stake if they yielded to the enemy, namely, their families.

When opposition hits, it’s easy to get your focus off the Lord and onto your problems. At such times stop and, as Paul says, “Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth” (Col. 3:2). If you’re tempted to some sin, remember the devastating effects that it will have on your family. Get God’s perspective on your situation. “No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it” (1 Cor. 10:13). Keep your mind focused on the Lord!

**Conclusion**

Historian Will Durant observed, “Rome remained great as long as she had enemies who forced her to unity, vision and heroism. When she had overcome all her enemies, she flourished for a moment and then began to die” (cited in “Bits & Pieces,” 9/87). Opposition kept Rome strong.

If you know Christ and try to accomplish anything for Him, you will experience opposition, especially if you are in leadership. Respond as Nehemiah did, with prayer, keeping on with the work, vigilance against the enemy, and keeping your focus on the great and awesome God whom we serve.
Discussion Questions

1. How can you know the difference between legitimate rebuke and ungodly opposition? How can we grow even if it is the latter?

2. How can we determine the difference between healthy realism that acknowledges problems and unhealthy negativism?

3. Does Satan use believers to oppose God’s work? If so, how?

4. If Satan opposes the committed believer, why not avoid this by being lukewarm (see Rev. 3:14-22)?

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