

Responding Like Nehemiah - 4:1-23

A couple of weeks ago I said there is no such thing as opportunity without opposition. One of the great tests of life is how you handle it when there IS opposition. Do you panic under pressure? Do you get edgy, lose your temper, become discouraged, freeze, give up? What do you do? If you're going to be a believer part of the job description includes putting up with attacks. If you're going to be faithful as a believer you have to be able to cope with opposition, keep your cool and continue moving. We're going to get right into it this morning so first, let's look at the ploys used by Nehemiah's adversaries - There are three there that people still commonly use to stop or stall an effort or project.

Nehemiah 4:1-4 says, *"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!'"*

One ploy people try is **Distraction**. To distract attention from the issues they use tactics like mockery. That's a tool still used today - this was used a LOT in the recent elections. In the field of argumentation, this is one of many forms of what's called a Red herring fallacy. This one's called an Ad Hominem attack - instead of addressing the issue, you distract attention from it by attacking the person. Your tactics are directed against people rather than the position they're maintaining.

This is a common way to oppose changes, policies, or ideas a leader is trying to promote. Why can this be effective? First, it diverts attention from actual issues. You never get around to genuinely comparing ideas because the opponent isn't really addressing the point at all. Second, it makes you waste time dealing with the attack, rather than being able to pursue what you want to do. Third, it can undermine your sense of self worth and that tends to make us back down.

Ridicule is a substitute for reason. If some people can't reason you out of a position they'll try ridicule. People who use ridicule are usually just afraid. Afraid you'll succeed; afraid they're going to lose something. Sanballat mocks them and then calls them a, *"... bunch of poor, feeble Jews."*

Then to belittle them, he overstates the case. This is a Straw man fallacy – an argument based on misrepresentation of an opponent's position. He says *"Do they think they can build the wall in a single day by just offering a few sacrifices?"* No one ever suggested that they were going to rebuild it in one day. Instead of dealing with actual possibilities, the opposition sets up fake claims that are easier to knock over.

Their second ploy was **Conspiring**. Verses 6 to 8 say, *"...the wall was completed to half its height around the entire city, for the people had worked with enthusiasm. 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."* Opposition is getting organized. Instead of a few critics it's now a conspiracy. They gathered disgruntled parties to resist rebuilding.

The purpose was to stir up trouble and confusion. These sort of folks are still around today. Some people seem to always be against stuff; they make it their mission to get people discontent; to promote dissatisfaction and complain. Of course they act like they're the people in the right, but you can tell from their tactics that something's wrong. They bad-talk people they oppose and try to undermine their position. They gather others together to promote discontent.

A third tactic is **3. Agitation**. Verse 11-12 says, *"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!'"* They were saying these things so that people would get upset and disturbed. The quickest way to do this is by spreading rumors that feed on people's fears. The gist of it was, they're going to attack and we won't even know what hit us. The fact is, they didn't have enough power to do it. But the rumor was enough to agitate people.

Two things about rumors:

First, they're generally spread through those who interact with the opposition. Verse 12 said, *"...the Jews who lived near the enemy."* The people who were near the enemy were the most upset. When you're around negative

people, you become negative. The thing is, if Satan can get someone inside of the camp upset and panicky because of what the opposition is saying then he's got a major victory.

Second, rumors become more convincing when they're repeated. It says they *"...came and told us again and again."* What happens when a rumor is told over and over? People start to believe it and the negative tends to get exaggerated. Effective believers don't swallow rumors. They recognize that rumors are often false and generally exaggerated.

Now let's look at some **Consequences of Opposition**. Right after the opposition really got going, we hear in verses 10-11 that, *"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 working hard and you're also having to deal with resistance and opposition you get tired out.

From Nehemiah we see three things happening:

They were feeling **1. Exhausted** – We're told that the *"...workers are getting tired..."* They were worn out.

They were also feeling **2. Overwhelmed** – They say *"...there is so much rubble to be moved."* It was really hard work, but it's also a matter of perception. If you think about it, the piles were getting smaller. At this point they were half way there, so the piles had to be about half as bad as they had been at the beginning. But they're feeling overwhelmed.

They were also feeling **3. Powerless**. They said, *"We will never be able to build..."* When you're tired, everything looks impossible. They HAD been rebuilding the wall – they're half way there! Now they feel like they can't do it. Vince Lombardi said, "Fatigue makes cowards of all of us."

All of this worked to obscure what God was already doing through them.

So let's go on to **Responding To Opposition**. What do you do when you're under attack?

1. Trust in God. In verses 4-5 we find Nehemiah praying. *"...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."* Nehemiah is trusting God to defend them. He doesn't ask for power to retaliate against them - he asks God to take care of things.

Proverbs 26:4 says, *"Don't answer the foolish arguments of fools, or you will become as foolish as they are."* If you're getting ridiculed for your faith, or what your church is doing or whatever, don't answer back defensively. If you've got a project and people are taking pot shots at you, just pray, rely on God, and trust God to take care of it.

The greater the opposition the more you need to pray, to depend on God. When you're ridiculed don't take it out on people, talk it out with God. That's what Nehemiah does. He hears it but he doesn't retaliate or work to undermine them. He's been up front; he's come with the authority and he has the vision God has given him, so he trusts the vision God's given him and just he goes to God in prayer. The best response to some kinds of opposition is to not respond. Instead, go and pray and keep doing what you should be doing. The ridicule was ineffective because they kept on building, They kept doing the right thing. Opposition to what God is telling you to do won't stop you unless you let it.

Particularly if you're a leader and you're under attack, the first thing you do is pray. You take it to God. Sometimes if you ignore the opposition the criticism dissipates, sometimes it intensifies. That's what happened to Nehemiah. When the opposition ridicule wasn't working, they plotted together to fight against him.

2. Take the Situation Seriously - How do we know that Nehemiah did this? Verse 9 says, *"...we prayed to our God and guarded the city day and night to protect ourselves."* They were prayerful and practical. You do both. It's fine to lay in bed at night and pray, "Protect me from the burglars." But you also need to lock your door! Oliver Cromwell said, "Trust God and keep your powder dry." There's an old saying: Petition without Precaution is Presumption. Rely on God when you're being opposed. But also look at the situation seriously and be prepared to do your part. Don't ignore the danger to God's work and the wellbeing of people. And the stronger the opposition, the stronger your response.

Verse 9 says, *"We prayed."* Up to this time, Nehemiah had been doing the praying. Now all the people are praying. Where did they get that idea? They've been watching Nehemiah. Remember, the first week we talked about leaders mentoring and modeling, not just by telling. Nehemiah has been praying constantly for months. Now the people are praying too in unity with him, not just for their own concerns and ideas. The point is that corporate

challenges require a corporate response. Now all the people of God are praying and acting. They prayed and they posted a guard. Nehemiah sets up an alarm system. To be forewarned is to be forearmed. A lot of leaders have lost because they've underestimated the challenge. Don't just pray. Know your opposition and don't be ignorant about what's happening.

3. Address Your Weak Points - Nehemiah was trusting God and he was taking the situation seriously enough to take necessary steps. Then in verse 13 he tells us. *"...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."* He is reinforcing his weak points, the lower parts of the growing walls - where the wall was still only a few feet high. He makes strategic placements to reinforce his weak points.

Do you know your weak points? Do you know where you're most vulnerable? Effective believers and good leaders know where they're vulnerable and they reinforce that area. Know your weaknesses and anticipate objections and be ready to counter them.

Verse 16-20 says, *"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!'"*

They are working all around the city. They couldn't fortify the whole area. These are amateurs building the wall - they're not professionals at construction and they're not professional soldiers. So they needed a way to back one another up. Nehemiah said, "Whenever you hear the trumpet blowing we'll know the enemy is there. Everyone run to that side and we'll fight together." Keep your lines of communication open during times of opposition and be ready to support one another.

Here something to keep in mind: **Every time you start building something for God, you're asking for a fight.** If you start trying to build up your own personal spiritual life expect a battle. If you start trying to build up a church, expect a battle. Every time a church starts moving toward a new work for God, there's a battle. Why? Because Satan doesn't want churches built up. He manipulates situations to oppose you.

What we see here is that believers must build and battle at the same time. If you start doing anything of significance in this world, someone is going to oppose you.

Nehemiah had three alternatives. He could, a. Give up; b. Leave the work and go fight; or c. Build and arm defensively at the same time. He chose to build and battle at the same time - the only real choice. You never leave the work to fight opposition. Do that and you could spend all your time putting out fires and never get your job done. You could spend all your time dealing with the critics, complainers, cynics, and the discontent - greasing the squeaking wheel and never get to your vision; never get to what God's called you to do. Learn to build and battle at the same time.

And do it together. Never fight a fight alone. When you're facing opposition, get support. That is one of the purposes of the church. It's tough having Christian attitudes in a society where everything says "Don't live for Christ; live for yourself!"

4. Rally and Encourage the Workers - Verse 14 says, *"...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!'"* He's rallying the troops. He's reinforcing their confidence. He's raising their morale. That's the task of leadership. When you're under attack, the task of leadership is to reinforce the people, raise their morale. Don't be afraid!

What did he say to renew their confidence? *"Remember the Lord, who is great and glorious."* That's where our confidence comes from. Remember the Lord!

It's interesting that a lot of battles, wars and efforts have had slogans that started "Remember..." In Texas it was "Remember the Alamo". The Spanish-American War had "Remember the Maine." In World War I it was "Remember the Lusitania". World War II had "Remember Pearl Harbor". For quite a while I regularly heard, "Remember 9-11" All of those based on devastating attacks: Remember - and let's get them!

Nehemiah doesn't say, Remember when we were attacked! Remember the opposition. Remember when we got exiled to Babylon and the city got destroyed! He says, "*Remember the Lord!*" He's saying, "Get your eyes off the opposition; get your eyes off any past defeat and get your eyes on the Lord." If the devil can get you to focus on opposition he's won a major victory. Focus on the Lord.

Jesus said in Luke 12:4-7, "*Dear friends, don't be afraid of those who want to kill your body; they cannot do any more to you after that. But I'll tell you whom to fear. Fear God, who has the power to kill you and then throw you into hell... What is the price of five sparrows—two copper coins? Yet God does not forget a single one of them. And the very hairs on your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are more valuable to God than a whole flock of sparrows.*" If you have a healthy respect for God and you reverence God and you realize how powerful God is you're not going to have any problem with fearing other people.

Then Nehemiah challenged them: "...fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes!" He says, everything is on the line here.

5. Keep on Working - Verse 15 says, "*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.*" There's opposition out there. But that doesn't matter. We're going to keep on keeping on. We refuse to be distracted. They **all** returned to the wall. When the going gets tough, the tough get going.

With opposition the objective is to obstruct or stop your work. If the goal is to get you to quit what do you do to counter that? You don't quit! You keep on working no matter what! Calvin Coolidge said, "Press on. Nothing can take the place of persistence. Talent will not. Nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not. Unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not. The world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are the overwhelming power."

In spite of the opposition Nehemiah tells us in verse 21-23, "*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.*"

They didn't quit or slow down - what they did was redouble their efforts! He gathered everyone together so they could have one another's backs. When you're being challenged by opposition, it's time to stick together. Nehemiah demonstrated an important principle: Leaders model persistence. They're the last to give up; the last to jump ship. They hang in there. They refuse to quit.

What does the devil want **you** to give up? A dream? A relationship? An idea? A ministry at church? What does he want you to give up? The idea of being in a small group? Helping a friend find faith? If he wants you to give it up, what should you do? Keep going!

There's an old story that one day Satan had a sale. He was selling all the tools he had used over the centuries. Lying, hatred, malice, lust, greed, envy, jealousy, pride, all of his best tools. But there was one tool that was priced higher than all the other tools put together. It was so priceless to Satan and so expensive that nobody could afford it. It was "Discouragement" and it's Satan's most effective tool.

Satan may not get you to commit an immorality, but he can get you discouraged! A discouraged Christian is an ineffective Christian. That means we've taken our eyes off the Lord and put them on your circumstance. Satan never sold that tool. He's still using it today.

Whenever we give up, the devil wins. One of the fundamental principles of the Christian life is *Don't give up!* Persistence is the ultimate test of leadership. This is the acid test. How do you handle it when the going gets tough? When someone laughs at you or criticizes you that may hurt but it can't stop you. The secret of success is simply outlast your critics. How do you get to be an oak tree? An oak tree is just a nut that refused to give up his ground. There is nothing the devil would rather do than stall us and stop us so resist discouragement and keep on keeping on.