

Nehemiah 4.1-23

Overcoming opposition

Christ Church Selly Park

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Nehemiah: Following God's Heart [3]

Fake News

Five years ago Collins made 'fake news' their 'word' of the year (even though it's two). It was defined as 'false, often sensational, information disseminated under the guise of news reporting.'¹ Probably its most famous user is Donald Trump, who uses it to smear any news coverage he doesn't like or that promotes a view different to his own. Ironically, he even claims to have invented the term, despite it having been used in the 1890s.

The term might be 130 years old, but the concept was alive and well back in Nehemiah's day. We see it as he faced opposition from the governor and his cronies who didn't like the idea of the Jews getting stronger and rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.

The opposition came immediately – before Nehemiah had even reached Jerusalem. In chapter 2 verse 10 he hadn't even left Susa, but when **Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite heard about** his plans, **they were very much disturbed**. Then the fake news started in verse 19: **'What is this you are doing,' they asked, 'Are you rebelling against the king?'** No they weren't: in fact they were following the king's orders. But the fake news spread and we see them at it again in chapter 6:

'It is reported... that you and the Jews are plotting to revolt, and therefore you are building the wall. Moreover, according to these reports you [Nehemiah] are about to become their king... Now this will get back to the king...'

Nehemiah 6.6-7 (NIV)

In our reading we see how they ridiculed the work as well (3): **Tobiah the Ammonite... said, 'What are they building – even a fox climbing up on it would break down their wall of stones!'**

This was all a lie, and moreover it got personal too: attacking them first as a group and then Nehemiah as leader. The rumours and ridicule became fierce opposition, with plots, assassination attempts, and threats of war, all of which could have put an end to the good work they were doing rebuilding the walls.

(1) Opposition is good

Now in one sense, opposition is a good thing. In chapter 2, Sanballat is **'disturbed'** when he hears what Nehemiah is going to attempt (2.10). Chapter 3 then describes the amazing work from so many different people, organised by Nehemiah. Some did a little, others did a lot – but all of them together made great progress rebuilding the wall.

That's why at the start of chapter 4, Sanballat has gone from being **'disturbed'** to being **'angry'** and **'greatly incensed'** (1). The opposition grew because God's people were making progress, and there is no point opposing something that is no threat. Sanballat *wanted* God's people to have broken down walls – and those who oppose the church today want that too: he and they want God's people weak and defenceless, intimidated and beaten down.

That means when we face opposition, as long as we aren't being obnoxious, it is in a sense a good thing, an sign that we're on the right track, that we are being faithful, that we are maturing as disciples, that God's kingdom is growing in depth and in number.

Around the world today – including in the UK – God's people face human enemies, some similar to Sanballat, some worse.

But we need to keep in mind Paul's words:

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.

Ephesians 6.12 (NIV)

We'll come back to Ephesians 6 later. For now it is enough to be reminded that – unlike Nehemiah – in the main we **struggle** not against other people but the devil, **spiritual forces** of darkness and **evil**. Now, I am not one to see a demon under every rock or behind every problem, but the truth is that there *is* a spiritual battle and we need to be aware of it and prepared to fight in it.

Facing opposition isn't easy, but it encourages me that the enemy wouldn't oppose us if he didn't need to: if we weren't a threat he would leave us alone.

(2) Prayer is crucial

So opposition is – in a sense – good, and certainly inevitable. Which means Nehemiah's response – which should also be ours – is crucial.²

Allan mentioned it last week – do you know what Nehemiah did, time and again, in whatever situation he faced? He *prayed*.

When he heard about the situation in Jerusalem – he *prayed* (1.4).

When the king saw he was sad and asked what he wanted to do about his people back home – he *prayed* before answering (2.4).

When Sanballat and Tobiah got angry and ridiculed the building efforts – and by extension God himself – Nehemiah *prayed* (4.5).

When they plotted to fight against the builders, Nehemiah and the people *prayed* (4.9).

When the plots turned to false reports of rebellion, do you know what Nehemiah did? He *prayed* (6.9).

It was through prayer that Nehemiah made wise decisions, helped to encourage the disheartened builders, and stood firm against their enemies. Nehemiah was a gifted leader and project manager but more importantly he was committed in prayer.

Prayer is as important to our spiritual life as breathing is to our physical life *repeat* – and you breathe, don't you? – but how often we neglect prayer, and then wonder (and if you're me, complain) when our faith becomes withered and dry.

In verses 1-3 we read how the opposition started to grow, and become a real threat. It is no accident that in verse 2 Sanballat **ridiculed the Jews... in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria**. There was real, genuine peril here.

Put yourself in Nehemiah's shoes – or sandals, or boots. He knew what God had called him to do, and he was faithfully doing it. Things had started well – and now *this*? What's God playing at?!

We may not pray what Nehemiah did in verses 4-5, because we face different situations and don't have an army on our doorstep ready and willing to wipe us out. But we do face situations like this one, that don't make sense, that we don't understand, that seem to go against who God is or what God is calling us to do.

If that's you right now I encourage you to pray like Nehemiah: with honesty and passion. He was distressed, he was confused, he was angry – but he didn't turn his back on God, he laid it all out before him.

It's so much better for our anger to come out in prayer than for it to be expressed in public. God can take it. And it's better to let it out to God than to keep it locked up inside where it can turn, without us noticing, into bitterness and resentment.

Nehemiah 4 tells us: be angry, but on your knees not in public.³

(3) Discouragement is understandable

So far then: (1) opposition is good and (2) prayer is crucial. Next, (3) discouragement is understandable.⁴

I really feel for the Jews here. Chapter 3 describes a heady mix of excitement, hard work, and real progress. You can almost hear them singing as they work, 'God is with us!' Often when things go well we see it as a sign of God's presence and blessing – and then when trouble starts we think God has abandoned us.

For Nehemiah and the people were in big trouble: depression inside the city, and opposition outside.⁵ Verse 10: **the people said 'The strength of the labourers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall.'** And verse 12: **the Jews who lived near came and told us ten times over, 'Wherever you turn, they will attack us.'** The people had lost heart, they had become discouraged – and I can see why.

If you go walking in hills and mountains as I love to do, on a long, hard climb there are often moments when you want to turn back. ‘Is it worth it?’ you ask yourself.

It’s especially bad on walks that go up and down and up and down: on the way up you resent every step down as a waste of the steps up you’ve just done; on the way down you resent every step up because you’ve already done the climb and just want to get to the pub for a cold refreshing pint.

The problem is, life is like that. Life is not one slow, steady climb to the top, it is full of false summits, tempting vistas, deep valleys, and tantalising far-off views. That’s true of life anyway, let alone when you throw trying to be a disciple of Jesus into the mix!

I’m not surprised God’s people got discouraged. They’d worked so hard, but they were surrounded by their enemies, and building the wall was a huge undertaking. To them it felt like they had barely touched the huge mound of burned stone and rubble.

The thing is though, they *had* made a *huge* difference. The wall – all the way round – **reached half its height** (6). I’m no builder, but by my reckoning that means half of the rubble had gone – and that’s quite a lot!

Depression – much like doubt – distorts our sense of reality,⁶ so things appear bigger, smaller, harder or worse than they really are. And, they stop us doing the very thing we need, like someone who is hungry refusing to eat.

Growing up, I used to do that whenever we travelled. I would get stomach cramps from anxiety, and stop eating properly – which would make the cramps worse as I got hungry too!

Part of growing up – physically or as a disciple of Jesus – means learning to recognise when our attitude is stopping us from seeing things as they *really* are.

Nehemiah's response was – as ever – wise.

First, he did something about the immediate danger. The Jews' enemies were saying (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.'** It's no good wringing your hands in angst when you are about to be overrun by your enemies, so Nehemiah **stationed some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families, with their swords, spears and bows** (13).

When he had **looked things over** to make sure the city was secure, he dealt with the problem. Interestingly, he ignored the complaint about the rubble; I think he realised it was a red herring, an excuse, a symptom of a deeper problem. It's easy to make the mistake of treating a symptom rather than the cause – we need God's wisdom to be able to tell the difference.

So, Nehemiah reminded them of God (14): **Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome.**

Time after time we need to be reminded not to focus on our fears, not to stress about our troubles, but to lift our eyes to see God. We do that through reading the Scriptures, reminding ourselves who God is, how great he is, what he has done. We do that through prayer, making and devoting time for God. For as we lift our eyes to see God, so we learn more and more to see things as he does, and our fears seem less and less threatening. As the song goes, 'Giant fears are really small, when all you see is God.'⁷

Then Nehemiah reminded them why they were rebuilding the wall (14): **fight for your families, your sons and daughters, your wives and your homes.** This was not a team-building exercise, an activity he had dreamed up to keep them busy or to make himself look good. This was important, it really mattered.

And so they got on with the task. Nehemiah rejigged the way they worked: anyone doing building work **carried materials with one hand and held a weapon in the other** (17). They were ready to join the fight wherever the enemy attacked (19-20). It was hard work – they kept going **from the first light of dawn till the stars came out** (21). But they did it, they **rebuilt the wall** (6.1).

Overcoming opposition

Like Nehemiah we face opposition, though not quite the same way. Many of us can identify with those who said, **‘the strength of the labourers is giving out’** (10). So what do we do about it?

Prayer: I’d love us to build our lives around prayer rather than fitting it in when we can. I want our first instinct to be to pray, which helps us lift our eyes to focus on God, not our fears.

Trust: faith is not about being strong or robust ourselves, but putting our trust in *God’s* strength, leaning our weight on *him*.

Bible: they built the wall with a trowel in one hand and a sword in the other, and I’d love us to do the same – *our* sword is **the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God** (Ephesians 6.17). We need to read it, listen to it, meditate on it, memorise it – and ignore it at our peril.

We need to be ready to fight, but ultimately our purpose is not to battle but to build. Unlike Nehemiah, our enemies have already been defeated: by Jesus, who won the decisive victory on the cross. They still have real power to harm and to hurt, but they *cannot* separate us from God, because the life we have in Jesus is stronger than they are, stronger even than death.

Therefore as we build with Word and Spirit, as we learn to trust and lean on God, as we start to build our lives around prayer – what we are doing is living out the life Jesus has already won for us. It's not complicated, but it's hard, it takes discipline, and we need to encourage one another when we get disheartened.

Together with God we can overcome all opposition and rebuild the walls: Nehemiah shows us we do that by working hard while trusting in God's strength.⁸

¹ <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/fake-news>.

² Brown, *Nehemiah (BST)*, 73.

³ Brown, 74.

⁴ Brown, 77.

⁵ Brown, 71.

⁶ Brown, 78.

⁷ *Let your light shine*, Hillsong Kids, 2010.

⁸ Brown, 84.