

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on Nehemiah 4 on July 19, 2015 at Victory of the Lamb.

Series: Nehemiah
Today's Focus: Opposition

“Keep Working With All Your Heart!”

You ever look at the size of a challenge and feel overwhelmed? You ever face a problem that makes you feel like giving up? Last week in Nehemiah chapter 2 we saw Nehemiah take a night ride out on his mule to inspect the condition of the broken down walls of Jerusalem in order to assess just how bad it really was. And what he saw might have been enough to make him just turn around and head back to Persia. It was bad. It was so bad he couldn't even maneuver his ride through all the charred rubble that was strewn down Jerusalem's hillside. The challenge was so big it would've been easier not even to get started.

Remember too that these broken down walls had been like this for over a hundred years. So it wasn't like this was a surprise to the Jews who lived there. Nehemiah didn't have to say, “Hey guys, don't you know that the walls are sort of, well, broken down?” They knew that already! Likely there had been people before who said, “Let's try and rebuild” but then somebody shouted them down, “Tried that already. Ain't gonna work. What's the use?” (Ever hear that before?)

And no doubt many of the people had grown accustomed to their environment. Some of them maybe didn't even notice the rubble anymore. It's like when you live in a place a couple years and you get used to things that a stranger would think quite odd if they walked into your house like, “I wonder how come there's no handle on that screen door?” So they had gotten used to how bad it was. And they probably figured God didn't really have any special plans for them anymore. The spiritual condition of their hearts mirrored the physical condition of the walls. Broken down. There were too many naysayers and defeatists who said, “This is too large a task and there are too few people.”

But Nehemiah had a different perspective. He saw the glory from the rubble of their reality. So he rallied the people by redirecting them to God through whom all things are possible. Nehemiah could see a people turning back to the God they once knew. He realized the catalyst of this revival would be a wall rising once again. And so as he cast a vision before the people of what could be and should be in their lives, they started to believe that by God's grace it actually *would* be. The people started to believe that with God on their side they would do this. Things were going to actually change. Their lives would be different. God hadn't abandoned them after all. His ancient promise of a Savior would yet come true. So they said, “*Let's start rebuilding*” (Neh. 2:18) and they got to their work.

Well...challenge overcome, right? Just like in your life, once you start working on something that you believe is God's will, it's going to be easy to finish, right? Now that you've gone to marriage counseling with the pastor, better expressions of love are just going to start spontaneously happening from now on. Now that you've started going to church regularly, everything in life's just going to sort of fall into place. Now that you've owned up to that particular sin and repented of it, it's going to be so much easier to live a God pleasing life. Now that we've got our new ministry center half completed, ministry is going to be a breeze from here on out and people are just going to be so excited to come to our new shiny building. We won't

have to get up early to set up anymore. We won't have to haul stuff around. We can just sit back and wait for the people to stream through our doors. ... Right?

Well deep down I think we all know better, don't we? Often in starting out to do something that is good and God pleasing we know eventually there will come a season in which it will seem like it would've been better not even to start. Sometimes just when you think the pile of problems couldn't get any bigger in your life, all of sudden when you set out to do God's will, that pile's going to seem more like a mountain. It's been said that when you build a church, the devil wants to build a chapel right next door to sow the seeds of dissension and complacency and false doctrine or what we're going to see today as we continue studying Nehemiah, opposition.

So what can we learn today from how Nehemiah handled opposition? Well we're going to find fresh new courage to **Keep Working With All Your Heart!** You see when it seemed like things couldn't get any worse for Nehemiah on that night when he inspected the walls, things were actually going to get worse. It's one thing to launch a vision. It's another to see it through to completion. We read chapter 4 today: *When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews, ² and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said, "What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble—burned as they are?"*

³ *Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, "What they are building—even a fox climbing up on it would break down their wall of stones!"*

So we meet these two guys: Sanballat and his stooge, Tobiah. These were local government officials who felt threatened by the newcomer Nehemiah because they knew that both their political and religious influence over the whole region was in jeopardy if Jerusalem was rebuilt. So as long as Jerusalem lay in ruins, they kept quiet. The status quo suited them just fine. But almost as soon as the rebuilding effort started, they set out to sabotage it. Their goal? To get Nehemiah and the people to stop the work. To quit. To give up. And not just the work of rebuilding the wall, but the spiritual rebuilding of the hearts of the people.

Friends, do you recognize this threat? In Nehemiah's day their names were Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem, but their tactics are every bit as much the same as the devil's tactics against God's people of every generation. You see this isn't just Nehemiah's story. It's ours too. The devil cannot stand to see the Christ's church grow and thrive. He cannot stand to see God's people working together to spread God's Word with a spirit of unity prayerfully depending on God alone. He cannot stand to see the broken down walls of society being repaired. The devil hates it that in the midst of a country and a culture such as ours where currently he is gaining ground in people's hearts through general ignorance of the Bible, misinformation, indifference, and lies...he hates it that there is a new Christian ministry center being built on Loomis Rd here in Franklin, WI where God's Word is going to be taught in its truth and purity and our vision is to love people enough to meet them where they are with that Word. And so if the devil can't stop the building of the church by raising opposition against it, what's he going to do now? He will try and corral our morale. He'll try and sabotage our spirit. And even once the church building is built he will still keep trying to stop the work of the Lord just the same as he wants to do in your life too. You ever notice how the moment the

Holy Spirit gives you a spiritual breakthrough in your faith life, Satan doubles down on his efforts to sabotage it?

And did you notice the tactic that Sanballat and Tobiah employed here in Nehemiah's day? Ridicule. Insults. Sarcasm. Their weapons were their words. City walls were supposed to be able to withstand siege works from an enemy army, but what does Tobiah say? *"Even a fox climbing up on it would break down their wall of stones!"* Do you think this sarcasm stung a little bit? Of course it did.

How many of you remember the old saying, "Sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never hurt me." Why did we say that as kids? Because words really did hurt us, right!? You know this don't you? If a father says to his son, "Why can't you do anything right?" that's not a question for information. That's a verbal assault that creates a wound that a young man carries with him his whole life. If a wife says to her husband, "My friends think I'd be better off without you" this becomes a wound that potentially causes him to shut down emotionally. If a husband says, "If you'd just lose a little more weight so that you'd look more like so and so" that's a weapon of marriage mass destruction. Our words carry weight. They shape the culture we live in. And by the way they carry just as much weight when shared online. So we can either use words as tools to build up or weapons to tear down. If I had a recording of every word you spoke in just the 24 hours what kind of words would I hear? Friends, God hears those words.

You see Satan's strategy is to use words to discourage us or to wear us down with criticism until we give up on life or quit the work of the Lord. Have you noticed that it's getting harsh out there to try and live a Christian life without compromising your convictions or your integrity? Have you noticed it's getting pretty hard to have certain conversations even if all you're trying to do is keep the Bible front and center? Have you started to lose heart in our culture today being a Christian because somebody ridiculed you and you felt ashamed? Have you ever kept quiet about your faith because you were afraid of what someone would say to you? Have you ever been forced to sit through a class where the teacher made it known that they considered anyone who shared your beliefs to be an idiot, a bigot, or worse? Have you ever been accused of hatred even as you were going out of your way to show true love? Have you experienced cyberbullying or body shaming? It's not a game young people just play. These are sinful tactics that Satan uses to discourage people and make them want to give up.

So what do you do? Do you get sucked in and retaliate? Do you get discouraged and give up trying to do good? Either of those options of course the devil would be happy with. He wants you to give up. He wants especially to see God's promises fail. And this was never truer than when it came to God's promise of a Savior. Remember, Nehemiah's rebuilding effort was about more than just rebuilding a wall. It was about rebuilding a nation that was chosen by God for the salvation of the world through a Savior who would be born for all.

That's why here's how Nehemiah responded to these insults. ⁴ *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.* ⁵ *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.* Now I know this sounds harsh, but first just think about the fact that this was in the midst of the struggle when the outcome wasn't yet a certain success. In other words Nehemiah recognized that the insults of Sanballat

and Tobiah were in direct opposition to God's plan of salvation. So he could hardly at this time pray that their wicked schemes would prevail because that would mean God's work and God's promises would fail.

In the same way Martin Luther once said that when we pray the Lord's prayer and say, "Hallowed be Your name...Your kingdom come...Your will be done" we are not only praying for those things to happen but for their opposite as well—that the devil and his evil schemes would fail for they are in direct opposition to God.

And as far as Nehemiah himself was concerned, there's a good example here. Nehemiah didn't retaliate. He didn't waste time getting sucked into a war of words with his opponents. Instead he left it to God to deal with the troublemakers so he could get back to work because the same God who promises to forgive our sins in the gospel is also the same God who threatens in his law to punish those who despise him. We shouldn't forget that. God told Abraham, and by extension those who hold to the faith of Abraham, "*I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse*" (Genesis 12:3).

So Nehemiah wisely leaves justice in the hands of God while continuing to do the work God had given him to do. ⁶ *So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart.* How did they respond to opposition and ridicule? **They kept working with all their heart!** Why? Because when Sanballat said, "*What are those feeble Jews doing?*" you know what? They knew that in a sense he was right. They were completely outnumbered. They didn't have the resources. Humanly speaking it looked like they didn't have a chance. They were feeble. But instead of facing this fact by being discouraged, they found strength in God!

Nehemiah was an ordinary man who trusted in an extraordinary God! This was reflected in the fact that he was an optimist instead of a defeatist. Nehemiah knew they faced a big problem, but he had the attitude: Show me the size of the problem, and I'll show you the size of my God! Friends, this is how God often works. He does his greatest work when the odds are stacked against him. I wonder if Nehemiah remembered the victory that David once won against Goliath who mocked him saying, "*Am I a dog, that you come at me with sticks?*" (1 Samuel 17:43). But you know how that story turned out, right? Though smaller and overmatched, the ultimate underdog, David said, "*You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied...All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the LORD saves; for the battle is the LORD's, and he will give all of you into our hands*" (1 Samuel 17:45,47). And so the shepherd boy David with just his sling and 5 smooth stones (he planned on perhaps needing 5, he only needed one!), David won. The battle belonged to the LORD!

So too when our Savior Jesus looked like the biggest underdog, beaten, mocked, and abused...nailed to a cross of wood with a crown of thorns piercing his brow, the devil could have only assumed that he was about to win! And yet little did he know that through his carefully crafted scheme, God was still working behind the scenes so that Jesus, in death, would win for us eternal life through the full and free forgiveness of all our sins. It was God's good and sovereign will all along to turn defeat into victory and death into life. For there at the cross God's amazing love and perfect justice met. There Jesus truly paid the price for sins—all the insults, all the verbal abuse, all ours too which he absorbed into his body and soul that we who trust in him might be forgiven and live forever in heaven.

Of course like an angry dog kept on a leash, the devil still wants to try and cause this work of sharing Christ's victory to stop to the degree that we let him, just he like did in Nehemiah's day. And in Nehemiah's day if he couldn't get the work to stop by causing their morale to be corralled, he was going to try and create a little security insecurity.

⁷ *But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the people of Ashdod [now they were surrounded by enemies—north, south, east, and west!] heard that the repairs to Jerusalem's walls had gone ahead and that the gaps were being closed, they were very angry. ⁸They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. ⁹But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.* Did you catch that? They prayed *and* posted a guard. The lesson here is that prayer and hard work go hand and hand. Like I said last week, "Do what you can (pray and work) while trusting God to do what you can't (grant success).

¹⁰ *Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, "The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall."*

¹¹ *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."*

¹² *Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, "Wherever you turn, they will attack us."*

You get the sense that the Jews were starting to feel the pressure. They were scared that what started as verbal insults would escalate into actual physical assault. Under constant threat, their strength was starting to go out. What would they do? Would they give up? Quit? ... How about you?

¹³ *Therefore I 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. ¹⁴After 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."* So Nehemiah's encouragement is twofold: 1) God's on our side! 2) The lives of your families are at stake! I wonder how much would change in our lives if we all realized the same thing. First, God is on our side! If your faith is in Jesus Christ, the Bible says this: *If God is for us, who can be against us?* (Ro. 8:31) And I wonder what would change if we remembered that the challenges we face living our faith in this world and the challenges we face in raising a Christian family, carry with them eternal implications. Why go to church? Why keep studying the Bible? Why have devotions with your kids? Why fight for your marriage? Because we're in a spiritual battle where hearts and minds and lives and immortal souls are ultimately at stake!

¹⁵ *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.* So also when you and I understand what's at stake and we're aware of the devil's schemes, God will frustrate them. Satan wants to discourage us with insults and make you feel insecure with intimidation and threats. If he can do that, he knows there's a good chance you'll quit

struggling against sin, you'll quit trying to do what's right, you'll stop the work God has given you to do and say, "Why bother? What's the point?" But friends, don't give up. Let's learn from Nehemiah. **Keep working with all your heart because it's worth it!**

¹⁶ From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armor. The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah ¹⁷ who were building the wall. Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other, ¹⁸ and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked. But the man who sounded the trumpet stayed with me.

¹⁹ Then I said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "The work is extensive and spread out, and we are widely separated from each other along the wall. ²⁰ Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!"

²¹ So we continued the work with half the men holding spears, from the first light of dawn till the stars came out. ²² At that time I also said to the people, "Have every man and his helper stay inside Jerusalem at night, so they can serve us as guards by night and as workers by day." ²³ Neither I nor my brothers nor my men nor the guards with me took off our clothes; each had his weapon, even when he went for water.

What a scene, huh! Can you imagine our construction site down the road with half the workers standing guard? Or with some holding a sawzall in one hand and a sword in the other? Thankfully the Builders For Christ haven't had to do this (at least not while I was out there!) although when I got to help out for a day a couple weeks ago we joked about what that would be like carrying a truss with one arm and a weapon with the other. So what can we learn here?

Well the reality was that the opposition seemed greater than the workers, but with their trust in God, each person and family found their place on the wall where they could work and see success. Together they filled in the gaps and **they kept working with all their hearts**. Imagine if our church could also be like this—a family where each one of us stands side by side in the gaps of the wall, encouraging each other with God's promises, and working with God's help without losing hope.

Friends, in week one I asked you the question, "What breaks your hearts when you think about the world, our country, the church, or our community?" Last week I asked, "What has God put on your heart to do with His help?" Today I ask you to think about this, "Where's your spot on the wall where you can join in where you say, "Now that is something I can do"? Because then working together, sharing Christ's victory, we will accomplish what seems impossible—the building of Christ's church even in this face of opposition.

My Next Steps

Point(s) to Ponder: Nehemiah was an ordinary man who trusted in an extraordinary God. He had the attitude: Show me the size of your problem and I'll show you the size of my God! Why can we have this same attitude and what would it look like in your life if you reflected this?

Treasure to Share: “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

Action to Take: Where’s your spot “on the wall” where you can say, “Now that is something I can do”? Consider it from a couple perspectives:

1) *In the Church* (for example: volunteering, witnessing, encouraging, giving, serving, praying, hosting, mentoring, leading, coordinating, etc). For some outside-the-box ideas check out the Kingdom Workers website www.kingdomworkers.com

2) *In your community*

3) *In your family*

4) *For a worthy cause* (for example: supporting your local pregnancy crisis center (ask Pastor Ben how!), helping out the Hunger Task Force, volunteering with My Team Triumph, _____.)

For Further Reading—Three Different Books Based on Nehemiah:

1. *The People’s Bible—Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*. By Dr. John F Brug. Northwestern Publishing House: Milwaukee, 1985. (This is a clear, accessible commentary that gives one a better understanding of the biblical text itself as well as the surrounding history.)
2. *Visioneering—God’s Blueprint For Developing and Maintaining Vision*. By Andy Stanley. Multnomah Publishers: Colorado Springs, 1999. (Whether a parent, a pastor, a businessperson or a layperson...this book is a delightfully practical tool for helping one discover purpose in life.)
3. *The Wall—Rebuilding a culture of LIFE in America and ending abortion as we know it*. By Kirk Walden. LifeTrends: Nashville, 2013. (As the title suggests this book is very specific and thought provoking in support of the pro-life movement.)