

## In the Face of Opposition

### Nehemiah 4:1-14

Sometimes it's hard to relate to a Bible story. I mean, the folks who were trying to build the wall around Jerusalem were subjects of the Persian empire – they had no political freedom. Because the city wall had been broken down, they had no personal safety. And when they tried to do God's will, when they tried to build a wall for protection, they faced nothing but insults and opposition on every side.

Can we modern American Christians really relate to them? After all, we're living in the land of the free and the home of the brave. Oh, make no mistake, the enemies of Christ are indeed active, occupying many positions of power and influence in academia, media, and government. And they do love to look down on those of us who cling to our faith instead of embracing all of their materialistic fantasies. But for the most part, we can tune them out, especially here in Mississippi. No one's threatening us or plotting against us, like the enemies of God's people were doing in verses 8 and 11 of today's passage.

So, I suppose we could approach this passage at somewhat of an emotional distance. We could, and should pray for our Christian brothers and sisters who are living in similar circumstances, in Communist or Muslim countries for example, places where Christians are second-class citizens at best and persecuted outlaws at worst. We could and should pray for those living in Europe or in other parts of America where a tiny minority of Christians have to endure all sorts of social hostility, all the while trying to shield their children from a rising tide of perversion and depravity. And perhaps we could even thank God that we don't have to live in such places, at least for now.

But I think that would miss the main point of today's passage, and really of the Christian life. For after all, whenever anyone tries to do the work of the Kingdom of God in this world, he is, in one way or another, swimming upstream against a tide of sin and selfishness. What did Jesus say? "A slave is not greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you." The unbelieving world will always end up hating the followers of Christ, in one way or another.

And the sad truth is that, although the nature of the attacks on Christians varies from place to place, they all have a dreary familiarity. Because the opponents of the Church are all, in one way or another, focused exclusively on the world and what it has to offer, they always end up heaping scorn on us and our spiritual objectives.

So, why are they so persistent? Well, from a strictly worldly point of view, our opponents are absolutely right. Take the insults that Sanballat heaped on God's people, for example. He called them feeble – and compared to the might of the Persian empire, they certainly were. They didn't have armies of soldiers protecting them, and King Artaxerxes, their royal patron who had allowed them to try to rebuild the wall, hadn't provided them any skilled craftsmen either. No wonder Sanballat laughed at the notion that they could actually finish any sort of fortification that would do any real good. No wonder Tobiah said a fox could knock down the wall they were repairing just by climbing up on it – when all was said and done, they really didn't know what they were doing. They didn't have any power or skill to speak of.

Well, how about us? As we try to build the Kingdom of God, we don't have any power, at least not in a worldly sense. We couldn't force our beliefs or opinions on others, even if we wanted to. We

can't make people behave, and we certainly can't make them be good. No, the only tool we have to counter hatred is love, the only method we have to oppose misunderstandings is the plain truth of God's Word, the only remedy we have to offer for so many of the social ills of our society is urging people to turn away from the world and trust in Christ.

Yes, as more and more people give themselves over to the pursuit of wealth and fame, we point instead to the example of Jesus, who had no possessions and was despised and rejected even by His closest followers. "I'd rather have Jesus than silver or gold. I'd rather be His than have riches untold." That's what we say. Is it any wonder that worldly people, those who are focused on the silver and the gold and the riches, make fun of us?

Oh, and another one of Sanballat's criticisms strikes a little close to home, doesn't it? He laughed at the length of time that it would take to build that wall. And that's true for us too. For if the only tools we have to build the kingdom are truth and love, we know that the only way to use those tools involves forming relationships with those who need to know Christ or know Him better. And relationships take a lot of time, don't they? Making room in our lives for new friends means we'll have to change some of our priorities, carving out room on our calendars, eliminating some of the items on our own agendas. And even if we do all that, even if we do what Jesus did and pour our lives into those who need Him the most, how long will it take for such tiny efforts to have any sort of meaningful impact on the broader culture?

And then there's the question of whether it's possible for anyone to complete this building project at all. Sanballat pointed to the burned stones scattered throughout the rubble, stones that had been weakened by the fires that had destroyed Jerusalem so many years before. Such stones would not be able to hold the weight of any sort of new construction, so it simply wouldn't be possible to rebuild the wall with much of the raw material they had at hand.

Well, has that thought ever occurred to you? When you look at the many problems our church and our culture face, have you ever wondered if they could possibly be fixed? Last week, we celebrated Father's Day, and when that holiday was first observed in America in the early 1900's, fewer than 8% of children under 10 lived without a biological or adoptive father. Today 25% do. And among black children, 57% do. However staunchly we advocate for traditional family structures, how can we hope to stem such a swelling tide of loneliness and abandonment?

But fractured families aren't our society's only problem. Last year the leading cause of death for all Americans under the age of 50 became opioid overdose, and even middle-class families in seemingly prosperous places like New Hampshire have been hit hard. In spite of all the wealth and power and information we Americans have at our disposal, too many of our young people are drugging themselves to death. Who can reasonably hope to restore a society that has sunk so low? Who can build anything out of this kind of rubble? Who can erect a wall with burned stones?

Well, what did God's people do in the face of such attacks? Like us, it was easy for them to become demoralized – that seems to be the idea behind the Hebrew in verse 5, that their enemies were offending against the builders with their harsh words. By the time verse 10 rolled around, the steady drumbeat of opposition had begun to wear the people down. They began to believe the flood of negative talk that threatened to engulf them. They began to realize how weak they were. They started

focusing on how much rubble there was to clear away. They started thinking that there was no way they could build the wall after all.

And maybe this is where you find yourself today. Maybe as you look at the cable news shows or websites, which chronicle one tragedy after another, you've begun to lose hope, at the very least the hope that any of us can make any real difference. What can we do about corruption in government agencies and bias in the media? What can we do about failing public schools or crumbling infrastructure? What can we do about the irresponsibility that has led to our soaring national debt or the unspeakable tragedy of abortion that has prevented more than 50 million Americans from ever having a chance to be born?

And what can any of us do about our increasingly polarized political climate, where leaders of the different parties not only hold irreconcilable differences where it comes to policy, but who attribute the worst of motives to one another? What do we do to heal the widening rifts within and between denominations of the Church itself? We see those sorts of fissures beginning to appear in verse 12 of today's passage. Nehemiah says that those who lived by them, meaning those who lived near Jerusalem but outside the walls, began to turn against the whole project. They objected so incessantly that Nehemiah says they complained against the builders ten times.

What caused all this friction? Why did those living outside the walls suddenly become so opposed to the rebuilding project? Simply put, they were afraid. They knew that Sanballat and Tobiah didn't want the wall rebuilt and threatened to put a stop to the project. But if they were to make good on their promises and attack Jerusalem, it was the people living outside the city walls who were in the greatest danger, for the wall would offer them no protection. In short, the people living outside Jerusalem wanted the wall-builders to cool it, to stop stirring up their enemies so they wouldn't be in harm's way.

And so we see that in the face of insults and threats, God's people actually began to believe that their opponents were saying – that there was no way they could finish the wall, so they shouldn't even try. They were in danger of being overwhelmed by the level of opposition they faced, by the enormity of the task that lay before them, and by the divisions that began to surface within their own ranks – and I think we can understand how they felt, at least sometimes.

But there was one more insult Sanballat leveled against them, one that revealed the core of the reason for his opposition. In verse 2 he scorned them for even trying to offer sacrifices to God. He mocked them for bringing God into the picture, for thinking that God could or would do anything to help them. What difference could a few slaughtered lambs possibly make in the face of real life, real political power?

But that's where Sanballat, and really all the enemies of the people of God throughout the years have gotten it wrong, spectacularly wrong. For the fact is that God can indeed make a difference, no matter how impossible our problems may seem, no matter how enormous is the opposition that we may face. In fact, it was one Sacrifice, one slain Lamb of God, one Son of Man dying on a cross that has unleashed the Spirit of God into this world, pouring out the love of God that sweeps away all hatred, pouring out the truth of God that confounds every lie, pouring out the power of God in such a way that not even the gates of Hell will be able to prevail against the onslaught of the Church of God.

And it was such confidence in the power and truth and love of God that prevented God's people from collapsing under the weight of all their problems, that kept them from giving up in the face of all their enemies, that stopped them from surrendering to all the forces that threatened to divide them. In verses 4 and 5, Nehemiah prayed on behalf of his people that God would do justice, that God would bring all His enemies to their knees, that God would allow His enemies to experience the same kind of punishment they were trying to inflict on God's people. In verse 9, they repeated these prayers, even as they set up guards against those who conspired against them. And in verse 14, Nehemiah encouraged the people to remember that, in the last analysis, it didn't matter how weak, how unskilled, how poor, or how divided they were. It was the Lord Who is great and terrible, the Lord Who is great and awesome, it was the Lord who would overcome their enemies, who would fight for them, who would give them the victory.

And the same thing is true for us today. Yes, we've got big problems in the Church and the world. And yes, there are concrete steps we can take to try to solve some of these problems – we'll look next week at some of the ways that God's people stood up against their opponents. But the bottom line for them and for us is that nothing is impossible for God. Our God can not only part the Red Sea for His people and drown their enemies in its waters. By the blood of the cross of Christ, our God can free us from bondage to sin. By the empty tomb of Christ our God can give new life to all who trust in Him today, and eternal life with Him forever. And our God welcomes all His children to rely on Him in faith and look to Him in prayer, trusting His justice to make things right, trusting His power to do even those things we find impossible.