

Opposition: *The Reality of a Leader*
Nehemiah 4:1-23

“Remember the Lord...and fight for your brothers”

Introduction: Leadership is truly tested when it is faced with crisis and opposition. This is when the resolve and conviction of a leader is revealed, whether he or she truly believes in what they are doing. Crisis and opposition are not optional, since anything worth fighting for, anything done for the glory of God will be fought against. That is exactly why we want to build up *convictional leadership*, those whom are convinced of what God has called them to and will continue on the path, regardless of what stands in the way. This leadership is expressed in marriage, in the home in raising kids, in the workforce, in our community/government, and in God’s church, and is expressed by men and women. **What are the forces that oppose us in this pursuit?**

The Enemy Within - Before we were redeemed and restored to God in Christ, we were dead in our trespasses and sin (Eph. 2:1-3), which meant there was no crises or war going on. We were given over to our sin and could not fight it. However, once we were born again, we are immediately engaged in a battle, one that rages in our inner person, our heart, affections, and mind. We have a daily battle between our flesh and the Spirit that indwells us (Gal. 5:16-18), and though we belong to Christ and have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires (Gal. 5:24), our passions are still at war within us (James 4:1). This is the source of quarrels and strife, the opposition that starts from the inside and works itself out.

The Enemy Without - Crises will always come in the form of people who oppose leadership, because there will always be an opposition to the truth as revealed in God's Word. Jesus Himself said (and demonstrated that when light and truth came, people loved the darkness and hated the light (John 3:19-20). This is why leadership will always breed conflict and opposition. Parents see it when they call their children to obedience. There is not simply a reaction to the act, but against the one giving the instruction. Our world will oppose the absolutes of Scripture because they shine light on sin, or make them feel uncomfortable, or judged, or left out. The reality is, those who oppose us **are NOT the enemy**, but a people to be loved and reached, yet will present themselves in opposition.

The Enemy Unseen - We also know there are battles going on that we CANNOT see. He is a schemer, a prowling and roaring lion looking proactively for someone to devour (1 Pet. 5:8). The best way to stay out of his way is simply to disengage with the battle. Those who are not fighting or holiness or obedience to the mission of God will be left alone in comfort and without the assault of Satan. But we take comfort in the fact that Satanic opposition is assurance that he is concerned and aware, and that we are on the right track.

Nehemiah had taken the people living in around Jerusalem further than they had ever been, but now the enemies were taking notice. They began to actively oppose the efforts, and Nehemiah had to not only motivate a people with wavering morale, but had to proactively prepare them for the literal fight of their lives. Opposition will never go away, and leaders are those who rise up, stand their ground, and press forward when everyone around wants to stand still. This requires leaders to know *exactly what God has called them to* in every walk of life or every area of oversight. Our goal is that everyone here today who leads someone else will be strengthened in their resolve in the midst of opposition, and will continue to move forward in confidence in what God is doing.

When Opposition Intimidates (1-6)

Nehemiah 4:1 Now when **Sanballat** heard that we were building the wall, he was **angry and greatly enraged**, and he **jeered** at the Jews. ² And he said in the presence of his brothers and of the army of Samaria, "What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore it for themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish up in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, and burned ones at that?" ³ **Tobiah the Ammonite** was beside him, and he said, "Yes, what they are building- if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall!" ⁴ Hear, O our God, for we are despised. Turn back their taunt on their own heads and give them up to be plundered in a land where they are captives. ⁵ Do not cover their guilt, and let not their sin be blotted out from your sight, for they have provoked you to anger in the presence of the builders. ⁶ So we built the wall. And all the wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work.

The Effectiveness of Verbal Threats

We were introduced to Sanballat and Tobiah in chapter 2 as Nehemiah had entered the city and before he began his rebuilding project. At that point, the text says they were **greatly displeased** at what was going on. That displeasure had turned to all out anger and rage by the time that the wall was being rebuilt in earnest. Their first tactic was to employ **psychological warfare**, one of intimidation and dismantling the morale of the people of Israel. This tactic had been useful before (see Ezra 4), so they began to **rattle their sabers**, trying to bring disunity and strike at the motivation of the group.

Where do they come from? What is the source?

- **Anger** - Here the text tells us the internal motivation of intimidation. Sanballat was the original Hulk, and was angry. His rage was exposed with his words. When bullying and intimidation take place it is because there is deep anger that is misplaced and not dealt with. But why was there such anger?
- **Jealousy** - Perhaps it was jealousy, as there was a new leader in town who was effective. There was a growing movement and success that threatened the one who used to be the big dog. How often is that the source of us gossiping and slandering someone else, when we are truly jealous and threatened by their success, life, marriage, or family?
- **Loss** - For Sanballat, it meant that his town of Samaria now had a big competitor, one who worshipped another God. The other townships and nations around had an agreement, that they would not judge each other as long as they admitted all forms of worship were valid. The Jewish population came in worshipping an exclusive God, which invalidated all others, and created angst.

Remember, when someone engages in verbal warfare, whether its gossip, slander, lies, intimidation, or hurtful words, it comes out of a heat that has been given over to sin which bursts forth in words.

What is the tactic?

Notice that the tactic he took is still being used today. Sanballat gathered a majority around him, bringing in Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites. He also gathered the **army of Samaria** (2) when he began his jeering. This was the ultimate *show* of force - look at how many are on our side, look at what you are up against, there is no way you can withstand all of us. Then he began a verbal assault in front of all:

"What are these feeble Jews doing?" Classic intimidation is to declare the weakness of your opponent making them *feel* they have already lost

"Will they restore it for themselves?" - This task is too big, too large for such a small group - you'll never do it!

"Will they sacrifice?" - Do they think that they could say a few prayers and add some catchy Biblical words and it will magically get done? This cuts down the faith we place in the power of God.

"Will they finish up in a day?" - Do you realize how long this will take you?

"Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, and burned ones at that?" - This is where exaggeration and fake news comes in - just say it loud enough with enough people and it becomes the public narrative and version of the "truth". The stones had to be re-stacked and moved, but had not been burned up. The gates had been, but exaggeration is the weapon of a bully.

"Even if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall" - Again, this is a classic tool, where a plausible but untrue fact is thrown out. Excavations have shown that part of the wall was 8-9 feet thick, hardly something a small animal could knock down.

Why is it so effective?

- **Plays on our own insecurities** - We all want to be liked, accepted, and know that we are not crazy. Intimidating words play on those things we already think wrongly about ourselves and magnifies them.
- **Elicits Fear** - Fear tactics are hugely effective. Fear preys on the potentialities of loss, and point out those things that we are most afraid to lose. Family, finances, reputation, or a certain way of life are those things that we fear losing.
- **Weakens Resolve** - All of this sucks the life out of motivation, movement, and obedience. The tongue, our words, are more powerful than any weapon, cause more destruction than any bomb, and wield more influence than any world leader. Words can tear down or build up.

Today, these tactics are still being used. Lawsuits and threats of shutdown are thrown around actively in our culture. Our enemy is trying to cause us to stop, to change direction, or to capitulate, and if any of that happens, they win. **So how did Nehemiah respond to these threats?**

The Active Response of Convictional Leadership

Prayer as a first resort – I don't know about you, but when I am verbally assaulted, my first reaction is to fire back in kind. You want to throw out these verbal darts and half-truths - let's dance buddy boy! But that is NOT WHAT CONVICTIONAL LEADERSHIP DOES. Notice that verse 4 breaks into prayer without introduction. It's as if Nehemiah wrote this showing how quickly he reacted in prayer. Instead of retaliation, or defense, or clarifying truth, he appealed to his God. If we learned this lesson alone in leadership and pursuit of Christ, we'd not only be better at conflict resolution, we'd also be able to lead in convictional ways.

Prayer that calls for justice - Nehemiah's prayer gives us both encouragement and angst. First, he calls on God to act rather than himself. This is the right order of justice. God is just, and he will ultimately bring the justice we so often want to fight for. This is the encouraging part. It's exactly what Jesus modeled, that when He was wronged He did not wrong in return but kept entrusting Himself to the Father who judges justly (1 Peter. 2:23). In other words, no one gets away with nothing, we simply may not get to witness it. The second part is harder. He prays in what is called an **imprecatory way**, calling for justice and judgement on enemies. The Psalms are full of these, as well as the prophets. They sound like this:

Jer. 18:23 *"Yet you, O LORD, know all their plotting to kill me. Forgive NOT their iniquity, nor blot their sin from your sight. Let them be overthrown before you; deal with them in the time of your anger."*

It's important that we see two things: 1) God is the one who brings judgment and justice, so appealing for Him to judge rightly is safe. 2) We live in a time where Jesus changed this approach by His own example. We are willing to suffer, if it's God's will, instead of firing back (1 Peter 3:17). We do this because those who would persecute us are those we are called to love (Matt. 5:44). It is because God's justice is coming that we respond in love, communicating the gospel.

Prayer helps us to move forward - Because he did not bite the hook of intimidation, Nehemiah was able to get the people moving forward, and they got the wall built halfway (6). Intimidation seeks to distract and make afraid: convictional leadership keeps moving forward fearlessly.

When Opposition Threatens Safety (7-14)

Nehemiah 4:7 But when **Sanballat** and **Tobiah** and the **Arabs** and the **Ammonites** and the **Ashdodites** heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and that the breaches were beginning to be closed, they were **very angry**.⁸ And they **all plotted together** to come and **fight** against Jerusalem and to **cause confusion in it**.⁹ And we **prayed** to our God and **set a guard as a protection** against them day and night.¹⁰ In Judah it was said, "The strength of those who bear the burdens is failing. There is too much rubble. By ourselves we will not be able to rebuild the wall."¹¹ And our enemies said, "They will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work."¹² At that time the Jews who lived near them came from all directions and said to us ten times, "You must return to us."¹³ So in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, in open places, I stationed the people by their clans, with their swords, their spears, and their bows.¹⁴ And I looked and arose and said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, "Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes."

The Effectiveness of Physical Threats

Sanballat stepped up his game. Verbal threats were not working, so anger fired the furnace of physical force. He gathered the nations around Jerusalem and had them descend literally from every side. Now this small band was surrounded (it's not the last time this has happened in Israel). Notice the effect this had:

Creates fear and confusion -It is clear that their planning and plotting was NOT all out war, since they were not willing to sacrifice that much. This was going to be guerilla tactics that were more in line with terrorism than drawing up battle lines. They would attack at night. They would attack different points of the wall. They would prey on the weak points and weak people. Creating a sense of fear from an enemy that we cannot see nor do we know when they will attack is a tactic that is used today, and is highly effective.

Creates Distraction - Anyone on a mission falls short when they start looking over their shoulder. When we feel like we have put out fires all over the place we forget that there is something greater to do. Once the people were concerned about their well-being, the mission was in doubt.

Causes Strength to fail - Verse 10 says it worked. **When our lives are more important than our convictions, we will fail in our mission.** This turned the heart of the people who had "a mind to work" to a people who looked at the rubble and said, "no way".

The Active Response of Convictional Leadership

Prayed and set a guard - Faith in action is the motto of a convictional leaders. Prayer should be our starting place (and ending place), but that never cuts off responsibility to act. We pray and plan. Nehemiah trusted the Lord for protection, and the way God would protect is through the people He provided. This was similar to a battle cry of soldiers during WWII - "Praise the Lord and pass the ammo."

Responded to a real threat - A leader should never overreact, but he absolutely must **react decisively**. The enemy had gone beyond saber rattling and had put feet to their threats, saying their goal was to sneak in and kill (11). Nehemiah moved quickly, for a short time stopping the building process, and armed the people to answer the threat. He brilliantly put clans together, since one man defending his home and family is worth 10 hired soldiers (according to Robin Hood in *Prince of Thieves*). There were times of bold movement forward, but now was a time of defense.

Reminded the people who fought for them and who they fought for – Leaders must be able to inspire with words at times, to reclaim the hearts of a downtrodden people. *Henry V* and the battle at Agincourt, William Wallace in *Braveheart*, or Winston Churchill during WWII are examples of leaders who stirred soldiers to turn from cowering to bravery. This was Nehemiah's great speech (put some Hans Zimmer music in the background and this is goose-bump territory). **First** he called them to cease from their fear, recognizing the real issue at hand: NOT the enemy but a lack of faith and resolve. **Second** remember the greatness of God. They began to believe the enemy they saw was greater than the God they couldn't. **Third** they were to remember who they fought for!

This is convictional leadership! In our homes, workplace, and church. What we are fighting for and who fights for is GREATER than anything our enemies can throw at us. A few weeks ago we said that our fight is NOT for land or military superiority, but for a holy temple (Eph. 2:21), a spiritual house (1 Pet. 2:5) made up of living stones. We fight for the unseen, raging war against principalities and powers in this present darkness (Eph. 6:12). We have been given the truth that is the cure for a dying world. We are in a battle for the souls of men, proclaiming repentance and forgiveness to all nations, knowing that message alone will bring all kinds of opposition. But we do this because this is the greatest mission we could have, our God fights for us, and we do it together as a household of faith. So we do not operate in **fear, we will not be intimidated, and we will not stop.**

When Opposition is Thwarted (15-23)

Nehemiah 4:15 When our enemies heard that it was known to us and that God had frustrated their plan, we all returned to the wall, each to his work.¹⁶ From that day on, half of my servants worked on construction, and half held the spears, shields, bows, and coats of mail. And the leaders stood behind the whole house of Judah,¹⁷ who were building on the wall. Those who carried burdens were loaded in such a way that each labored on the work with one hand and held his weapon with the other.¹⁸ And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built. The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me.¹⁹ And I said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, "The work is great and widely spread, and we are separated on the wall, far from one another."²⁰ In the place where you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us."²¹ So we labored at the work, and half of them held the spears from the break of dawn until the stars came out.²² I also said to the people at that time, "Let every man and his servant pass the night within Jerusalem, that they may be a guard for us by night and may labor by day."²³ So neither I nor my brothers nor my servants nor the men of the guard who followed me, none of us took off our clothes; each kept his weapon at his right hand.

The Effectiveness of Faith Driven Endurance

God had frustrated the plan - When the enemies heard and saw that their foe was organized and armed, they backed off. In other words, for the forces that stood against Nehemiah did not operate out of conviction but personal gain. It was not a cause worth dying for, so they stopped. Today, that happens as well, where people will only fight as long and hard as it suits them. There are very few causes, especially social, that people are willing to be martyred for. Nehemiah here gives credit to God for frustrating the enemy, even though it took planning and action on behalf of the people. When we start

with prayer and engage in things greater than ourselves, its easy to give glory back to God, knowing that if He did not act, it would have gone nowhere.

The work would not stop - After a temporary cessation of building, once the enemies lost motivation Nehemiah got back to work. There was no questioning whether they should risk further harm, but instead forged ahead. When our mission is right and glorious, we never have to quit.

The Active Response of Preparation & Anticipation

Power of "Sword & Trowel" work and ministry - The picture of how the rest of the wall was built has been taken up by many ministries throughout the centuries. Since the threat was real, and the task was great, constant vigilance was a must. So everyone who built the wall had to also be ready to do battle without any lag time. So half of the work force would work while the other half would keep guard. Those building would have one hand on their sword and another on their trowel. All builders would keep a weapon by their side, so that if a trumpet sounded on any part of the 1 1/2 to 2 1/2 miles of wall were attacked, the rest could come and defend. They worked into the night, kept on alert even on water breaks, and all the leaders joined in. They stayed dressed for battle during the rest of the building and completion of the wall. They had the assurance that their God would fight for them.

Luke 12:35 - *"Stay dressed for action and keep your lamps burning, and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the wedding feast, so that they may open the door to him at once when he comes and knocks."*

We must stay ready, not for a fight or to brawl with our enemy, but ready to give a defense to anyone who asks us for a reason for the hope in us (1 Pet. 3:15). Ready to give a defense of the gospel, ready to give reasons for our faith, reasons for our hope without cowering in fear. We must identify real threats and be as prepared as we can, but not to the point of paralysis. We put on the whole armor of God, standing firm against the schemes of the devil, fastening the belt of truth and shield of faith (Eph. 6:10-17), while all the time *praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication* that God would give opportunity for words to be proclaimed boldly concerning the mystery of the gospel.

So we brace for opposition, which will come when we seek to honor the Lord, but we never give in, we never give up, and we never stop. So we do not walk in fear, but remember that if the Lord is for us, who can be against us, and we do this together, fighting the good fight of faith.